CURATING *I N* CONTEXT

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POLITICAL *AND* PERFORMATIVE CURATORIAL IMAGINARIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The Curatorial, the Political and the Performative

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In this publication we wanted to interrelate the notion of the curatorial to a problem, or a situation, to time, space, conditions and processes of work, and to observe its transformation in those relations.

One might say that *curation* is a problematic term, especially that nowadays even the window arrangement in a shopping mall is labeled as a curator's design. However, the notion is already in wide circulation, in the field of performing arts where we work as well, and we want to address it, and relate it with certain ways of thinking and doing, in diverse conditions and contexts. By taking these steps through this publication we also want to affirm certain ways of doing/working as a curator today. As Malzacher would say, "The ambiguous title 'curator' should be seen as a self-provocation, a challenge, a self-inflicted and complex task, rather than a possible gain of prestige." (Malzacher 2019)
We want to address the term as such and try to reflect it as programming- dramaturgy - producing - organizing - presenting - exhibiting - reflecting or in its broadest sense, as a process of thinking and doing, and taking care of the context in which artwork is developed and appears.

We started reflecting on the term, but also working on the creation of certain educational programs through which we could develop and position the term and profession in the field of performing arts. Thus, we started a joint project entitled Curating in Context (2019-2021) supported by Erasmus+, co-organized between two NGOs (Tanzfabrik Berlin and Lokomotiva Skopje), and two Higher Education Institutions (Stockholm University of the Arts and University of Zagreb) with the aim of responding to the challenges of the growing influence of the concepts of curating and curatorial in the contemporary art field, beyond the sphere of visual arts.

This project was focused on producing knowledge and opportunities for future students, practitioners, curators, scholars and cultural workers to critically reflect and address different socio-political and economic contexts, and develop curatorial methods to rethink the practices of performing arts in relation to activism, social movements and self-organization. In a period of two years, we developed a series of meetings, public events and various resources that thematized collaborative learning approaches through curating between politics and policies, as well valorizing art with the greater goal of manifesting the impact of the cultural and civil sectors on society.

As part of these activities we also developed an International School Curating in Context which was organized in 2020 and 2021 online, since after a great start of the project, we faced the pandemics, therefore adaptation to online delivery was necessary. During the project and within the school we wanted to open a discussion and explore non-hegemonic forms of collective practices and self-organization in the field of cultural production and bring the performing arts into dialogue with the curatorial as a non-restricted field, or a field that is not exclusively related to visual arts.

We opened by reflecting on curating and the curatorial (Irit Rogoff, Beatrice von Bismarck 2012, Maria Lind 2012, Paul O'Neill 2012) from the perspective of choreography and the performing arts, or as the "work of making constellation"

(Von Bismarck 2014), both context-conditioned and conditioning. We also reflect on non-representative forms of curating as a political perspective, discussing and thinking about models of working together, production/organization, dissemination, new modes of instituting the curatorial and curatorial practices related to social justice, social movements, activism, gender and queer politics, self-organized initiatives, and struggles for new communal forms.

We were, and are here, contributing to the process of thinking different, multiple and critical perspectives on curating (performing) arts. Moreover, we want to look at intersections and productive entanglements and tensions between the curatorial and the performative, whereby the curatorial would no longer be understood as merely a display or presentation of artworks, but as an extended practice which strives to be in-process, durational, ephemeral, and which enables art to expand and go beyond white or black boxes, to discover, to research, to de-fetishize, to allow and enable the production and display of knowledge in many ways and directions, and to enact, bring forward and construct different and non-hegemonic imaginaries, worlds, bodies, sensoria and socialities.

By setting into focus the performative dimension of both the political and the curatorial/curating, we would like to tackle their relation with the performing arts and the performative in general, and vice versa, explore the political and critical potentials of performance arts and dance historically and today, in relation to feminist, queer, critical race studies and ecological discourses and practices.

This publication additionally reflects on the consequences and potentialities that emerge, when setting performative curating, the curatorial, the performative, political and performance arts as critical points at the center of one's investigations.

In the preface of Inoperative Community Jean - Luc Nancy elaborates the difference he makes between, what he calls, the political, on the one side and politics, on the other. While elaborating his leftist political determination as a position which conceives the political as related to what is at stake in community, in difference to the hegemonic political determinations which analyzes the political only as what is in charge of order, administration and institutions, Nancy determines the political as the very act of institution of politics, the origin and foundation of politics, or the "site where what it means to be in common is open to definition". Politics, on the other hand, signifies the play, the struggle of forces and interests "engaged in a conflict over the representation and governance of social existence." (Nancy 1991, p. xxxvii)

The political helps Nancy to describe the abyssal character of the social, which is to say the contingent and relational foundations of its institutions, organization, distribution and principle. Politics, on the other hand, is a form of technological action and thinking consisting nowadays mainly of institutionalized social management and of what Foucault would call governmental technologies or police. It appertains to the realm of calculation, where all arising problems and difficulties are to be

'resolved' by administrative means, while everything questionable in the radical sense, that is, questionability as such, disappears (Marchart 2007, p.67).

The concept of the political (le politique) as one of the core operational frameworks through which we approached the editing of this volume marks the instituting moment of society, as the act that compensates for the groundless ground of society, or the "supplement for the groundless stature of society," which, as such, withdraws at the very moment it grounds society (ibid., p. 3-17). The moment of ground, and the moment of actualization/concretization of the ground, which is to say the political and politics will never be able to fully meet in such a way that every politics is destined to failure and unable to fully realize its promises. This post-foundational political philosophy opposes foundational politics that identifies a principle, a substance and/or a ground of the political order and society as being is immune to revision and contestation and that is situated outside of society or politics.

The questioning of *the political as the political difference* puts into question and contests the very logic of the archaic, as the logic of origins, authority, principal, or principiat, that is constitutively linked in the pair archē-telos. Bringing forth the concept of the political thus amounts to disclosing the *an-archy* of the *archē* itself, being the breach, the rupture, uncertainty, the disturbance, the displacement, the antagonism, the impossibility of solution of its inherent paradox, and the trace of the incommensurable difference, the most distant and foreign with the intimacy of propriety of the archē.

This originary an-archy in the core of the origin of politics, brings to light and 'reminds' the social and political organization of networks of relations, functions, norms, institutions, identities, which to say politics, of its constitutive finitude, dwelling in the very heart of politics or the logic of the political we have inherited as tradition, and as an affirmative 'negation' of all parameters of certainty.

While making impossible the enclosure of politics, community and the social, the political, in the same move, makes it possible, opens the space for its constitution and transformation, and thus, for radical political action. The political is thus inextricably knotted with politics, we could even say it is politics itself "seen from a point of view that 'measures' it against something that it neither is nor can ever be: the political's impossibility." (Esposito 2015, p. xx1) The retreat and failure of origins by an insoluble and irreparable lack/gap overlaps with the possibility of plural constitution, always anew, of the origin of community, as the absent origin.

The research in *political* ontology therefore does not focus on regional political ontologies that would tackle specific and concrete political and social institutions, organizations or actors. Rather it brings forth the political constitution and roots of all things social and the being of the social world. The political perspective on social being does not assume that "everything is political in terms of politics, but in the sense that all social affairs are political in terms of being grounded, to greater or lesser degree, by the political, that is to say: through instances of conflict, power, subordination, oppression, exclusion and decision as much as, of course, resistance, opposition, confrontation, association or consensus-building." (Marchart

2018, p.12) This move simultaneously necessities and opens the possibilities for radicalizing politics and democracy since it stands against the grain of the post-political and post-democratic visions of the end of politics, end of ideologies, end of antagonism and the hegemony of the political consensus (Mouffe 1993, Mouffe 2012), by bringing to light the processual, open, unstable, antagonistic, relational and temporal dimension of the social being, that is to say the political, and prevents the techno-managerial occupation of the space of politics (by emphasizing the autonomy of the political) as much as the totalitarian and authoritarian ontological visions based on race, nationalism, ethnicity, religion, or the alleged People's Sovereignty (by emphasizing the play of presencing/absenting, grounding/withdrawing and ungrounding, founding/shattering, appearance/retreat, archē/an-archy).

This detour through the concept of the political was made since we wanted to bring to light the resonances and entanglements it shares with the concept of the curatorial and its differentiation from the institutionalized practices of curating as the care, programming- dramaturgy - producing - organising - presenting - exhibiting - reflecting of works of art within the sedimented hegemonic forms of the "white cube", galleries and museums. Acknowledging the explicit genealogy of the concept of the curatorial in relation to the concept of the political, Maria Lind brings to light the performative dimension of the curatorial, its institutive force and capacity to bring into existence and create "temporary social situations" whose effects can neither be enclosed, predicted nor delimited by or subscribed to a single and autonomous intentionality. If curating stands for the "technical modality-which we know from art institutions and independent projects alike," she argues, the curatorial would mark "a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas-to do something other that "business as usual" within and beyond contemporary art. "(Lind 2012, p. 20)

Malzaher (2019) also works on the term, but alternatively suggests that the notion of "performative curating" should not only acknowledge the social and other relational aspects of art, but that we should put these aspects at the center of our curatorial strategy. He suggests that performativity should be understood as a strategy to actively emphasize the very construction of its own reality, to show the process and not merely the product, to playfully acknowledge the artistic as well as the social, political, theoretical context. It is clear how this understanding can become a powerful means for curating.

As the "work of making constellation" (Von Bismarck 2014), both context conditioned and conditioning, the curatorial looks necessarily at the abyssal face of its (and the social's) groundless im/possibility, becomes a "warrior of the imaginary" (Martinon 2013), and opens space for antagonism, dissensus, instability, openness and frictions. By adjusting multiple social positions, interests and vectors of force, the curatorial mediates and trespasses various fields and forms of knowledge, art being just one element among many others, and performatively

enacts temporary worlds, antagonistic sensoriums and alternative social imaginaries. Associating and bringing together, that is to say staging the co-appearance of subjects, images, perceptions, discourses, objects, spaces and architectures, communities and world-building imaginaries, the curatorial resembles the Arendtian polis, "always transient, incomplete and thus necessarily controversial." (ibid., p.12) Jean-Paul Martinon brings forward persuasively the constitutive relation between the political and the curatorial, reflected not only in terms of the curatorial's shattering of the institutional prison house and the antagonistic bringing into dialogue of art's presentation and managing with the wider socio-political contexts in which it operates, but also in relation to its institutive moment and production of dynamic fields that foster, transform and expand our imaginative capacities, meaning-making parameters, perceptive frames, affective orientation and bodily habitus. Here is Martinon on the subject:

> "The curatorial is a jailbreak from pre-existing frames, a gift enabling one to see the world differently, a strategy for inventing new points of departure, a practice of creating allegiances against social ills, a way of caring for humanity, a process of renewing one's own subjectivity, a tactical move for reinventing life, a sensual practice of creating signification, a political tool outside of politics, a procedure to maintain a community together, a conspiracy against policies, the act of keeping a question alive, the energy of retaining a sense of fun, the device that helps to revisit history, the measures to create affects, the work of revealing ghosts, a plan to remain out-of-joint with time, an evolving method of keeping bodies and objects together, a sharing of understanding, an invitation for reflexivity, a choreographic mode of operation, a way of fighting against corporate culture, etc." (Martinon 2013, p. 4)

Both the political and the curatorial necessitate a turn toward the performative in their conceptualizations, in such a way that the world and social imaginaries they both bring into reality could be approached as the unstable effect of *material performative practice*, that is to say *self-organizing, relational, complex and dynamic practice of materialization and brining into being*, understood as *iterative intra-activity* producing different material configurings of the social/cultural world and bodies (Barad 2003, 2007; Latour 2005). Having said this, we do not however propose dispensing with the agency and ethical and political responsibility of the curator altogether, on the contrary, her agency is set as a node in a dynamic field of distributed agency, an anchoring point of condensation in a rhizomatic structure that demands even greater contextual attentiveness and vigilance, and hence responsibility.

This turn towards the performative is motivated by the extensive theoretical discussions and artistic experiments in the art practices of the fifties and sixties, as well as the various performance arts and body arts practices, including

the accumulated knowledge from performance and dance studies and contemporary choreographic and dance practices, that open the thinking of the performative as "a constructionist notion of identity as anti-metaphysical, emphatically material and historical, constantly refashioning itself in various contexts and configurations of reception." (Dolan 1993, p. 419) What makes the concept of the performative particularly fruitful for thinking about the concepts of the curatorial and the political as defined above is its emphasis on understanding the work as a relational process, that puts all qualities, boundaries, identifications and determinations in motion (Jones 2021). Each performative act, whether linguistic utterance or embodied gesture/action brings into being, enacts, the social reality it refers to, utters or plays. The performative logic perverts and turns upside-down the logic of cause and effect, in such a way that what appears to be the cause, the origin, substance, essence, self or identity underlying and mobilizing the performative act as its effect, is the very effect of the performative doing and saying. This performative gesture is most paradigmatically enacted in Judith Butler's theory of gender and queer performativity (Butler 1991), and her reapplication of the term to bodily rather than speech acts (Austin 1975).

What makes performativity and the turn towards performing arts, dance and choreography particularly fruitful for understanding and re-envisioning the curatorial is the central importance of embodiment, and the moving, sensing, affecting/affected and fleshy body in its relationality to other (both human and non-human) bodies, spaces, times, atmospheres, discourses, architectures, apparatuses, economies, geographies, images and materialities. As Fischer-Lichte has argued (2008), in performance something is happening in-between space, and the spatial relations established through movement and kinesthesia, and interpretative relations between actors/performers and audience are constitutive for what happens and comes into being. The performative and vanishing act of the performance brings into being an affective and embodied community of actors and spectators becoming co-actors themselves, whereby what is being favored is the "experience of physicality by all participants and their responses to it, from physiological, affective, energetic, and motor reactions to ensuing intense sensual experiences." (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 22)

It is with this background of concepts with the complex world-making and performative potentialities of the curatorial that we approached the editing process of this book and organized its structure into three major parts: 1) The Political, the Curatorial and the Performative, 2) Curatorial Imaginaries and Strategies, 3) Reading Performative Dissensus, and the last untitled appendix that reflects on a performance artist's practice and the embodied utopian longings it opens.

In the first part of the volume, The Political, the Curatorial and the Performative we are bringing forward political perspectives on the curatorial, curating and the curator through: social imaginaries or curation and creation as the construction of the im-possible, as cultivating the unfinished thinking of emergent communities, and as another possibility in this world (Theodoridou); curating and

curator as symptom of changes in art, as well as in society and the market, as well as perspective on curatorial (performative, space etc.) shaped through several related shifts in recent art discourse that fall together, (Malzaher) and perspective on participatory art, their complexities, curatorial agency, “felicitous kalokagathian curatorial practice” (Milevska) and kalokagathian curator.

We open the volume with Danae Theodoridou’s text that tackles directly at its core some of the major points of interest that motivated our endeavor, namely the complex relations between curatorial and performance practices and their potentiality to act as sites for construction and for bringing into reality non-hegemonic social imaginaries, a concept Theodoridou borrows from Castoriadis; a concept that not only elaborates what the political is, but also makes manifest the political responsibility of the arts. Theodoridou starts from the premise that our contemporary neoliberal capitalist socio-political landscapes have radically diminished our collective capacities for social imagination, reducing the political to technical and managerial operations of administering identities, calculating costs and profit as substitute for democratic processes, and measurably solving problems within already set and ossified frameworks of imagination. Furthermore, she complicates and problematizes art’s and curation’s role within this landscape of crisis of social imagination, persuasively criticizing pervasive modes of politicization of arts, namely modes “which connect artistic processes either with normative functions that aim to intervene, critique and -even more ambitiously- solve ‘real’ problems; or simply use/sell these problems in order to effectively take part in the capitalist market of artistic production with cynical reactions that prove one smart” (Theodoridou in this volume). Theodoridou urges us to question this imbrication and reduction of art to political problem solver, not only because it depreciates art’s and curation’s own radical capacities, but also because it reproduces the ongoing erosion of faith and the commitment of politics and political actors to social justice, by relegating their responsibility to the field of arts. Curation and performance arts, she argues, should attentively, with vigilant sensitivity for context and locality sensitively, and by denouncing hope’s reproductive futurism, dwell and open the existing fractures, alternatives and virtualities within the sedimented social imaginaries, and offer, create, constitute and stage possibilities and imagination for other ways of being, different relationalities, modes of feeling and perception, and constitute “a public frame that can contribute significantly to the reactivation of the dynamic relationship between the instituted and the instituting social imaginary in the time of ‘no alternative’; and, thus, to the emergence of alternative social imaginaries today.” (ibid.)

We decided to reprint in this volume the first version of Florian Malzacher’s influential text “Empty Stages, Crowded Flats” since it offers a perspective on curating and the curatorial in performing arts by bringing a performative dimension of curation and it’s constitutive relation with strategies mobilized and deployed in theatre and the performing arts. He problematizes and differentiates curator from programmer, seeing it as a symptom of changes in art, as well as in society and the market. Through a series of case studies of art and curatorial projects - including *B-Visible* by the German choreographers Kattrin Deufert and Thomas Plischke, *X*

Apartments by the German dramaturge and founding director of the Berlin HAU theatre, Matthias Lilienthal, *Chambres d'Amis (Guest Rooms)* by the curator Jan Hoet, the project *Finissage of Stadium X* of the Polish curator Joanna Warsza, *The Theatre* by architect Tor Lindstrand and choreographer and theorist Mårten Spångberg, *Truth is concrete* curated by Anne Faucheret, Veronica Kaup-Hasler, Kira Kirsch & Florian Malzacher, and others - Malzacher proposes a shift in emphasis in curation from the already well established focus on the artistic work and saving and promoting institutions. According to him, what curation and programming events and festivals demand in this specific historical conjecture is "the necessity of putting works into a larger context, to make them interact with each other and the world around them, rather than seeing them as entities. And to offer a collective experience not only during or within the performance itself, but turning the festival, the event, the venue into a larger field of performative communication." (Malzacher in this volume) The necessary and utopian vision of the curatorial, he argues, is to keep a dynamic field and bring into contact different social positions and needs, while performatively enacting a temporary shared reality that would change and displace institutional, aesthetic and architectural frames and spatial relations, as well as disrupt hegemonic temporalities, and power/knowledge grammars.

In her text, Suzana Milevska, shines the light on curation of participatory art projects, by emphasizing their potential to reveal, problematize and democratize the hidden historic, social and political implications of public spaces, blur hierarchies between art and cultural practices, unearth burning political issues and influence the constitution and reinvention of democratic public spaces. Milevska emphasizes the ethico-political responsibility of the curator, her role in navigating the tensions and complexities involved in participatory projects, and especially in "bridging both the gaps and the incommensurable dissimilarities between differently conceptualized art practices (e.g., poor theatre, fine art, cartographies), while strongly opposing these hackneyed hegemonic forms of curating that impose themselves to the art of disenfranchised communities and "subaltern cultures." (Milevska in this volume). Milevska in this text addresses curatorial agency, or the curator who acts as a social and ethical agency and strives towards enacting a "felicitous kalokagathian curatorial practice" as a practice that would not be reduced to managerialism, but would "entrust its intellectual and theoretical capacities in curatorial knowledge production as well as art for social change and collaborations among curators, artists, and activists." (ibid.)

In the second part of this volume "Curatorial Imaginaries and Strategies" we bring together texts by four art historians, curators and performing arts scholars who reflect on their specific curatorial practices, which are also related to diverse contexts where different politically and socially motivated curatorial strategies and forms of performative enactment of curatorial imaginaries are developed. We bring forward processes of preparing and curating the exhibition Queer Communion dedicated to the performance artist Ron Athey. This example brings to mind

"one way of thinking about curating live art in a way that explicitly foregrounds "context"" (Jones in this volume) or a process through which we can see that the exhibition exemplifies one particular context for curating live art: the intersection of institutions based on displaying static objects (the gallery) in relation to a form of art that is time-based and embodied (ibid.); questions concerning the role and responsibility of the curator, or dilemmas on 'chto delat' in the context of Moscow, but also what brings the curatorial turn due to Covid, or how we are turned towards locality, but not with the aim of talking about autochthonism, rather to strive for a recognition from the non-mainstream culture, as Proshutinskaya calls the space where besides visual arts also production of contemporary dance in Russia is situated and which gradually becomes that space of possible influencing, of visible contribution; through identification of curator as *cultural worker*, or specifically as a *worker,* as Založnik discusses and points out that artistic fields can function as activist fields where work is collective. She brings forward her personal experience as curator who works collectively, her dilemmas, questions and curatorial procedures, describing co-curating as one of many forms of collective-work or 'co-labouring that emerge out of dialogue, intense discussions and negotiation processes'; and specific contextual curatorial practice (exhibition of photographer Božidar Dolenc who created a landscape of cultural movements from Ljubljana in the seventies) framed by a spectator who is partially real partially fictional as Vevar says and is an example of how the political and artistic movements with their potential social transformations may work on the micro level of a personal self-narrative: text, as he points out.

Amelia Jones reflects on the dilemmas, tensions, questions, provocations and responsibilities brought to light in the process of preparing and curating the exhibition Queer Communion devoted to the more than three decades long artistic career of the queer performance artist Ron Athey. Jones tackles the problems of, not only curating performance art in gallery spaces, but also the responsibility involved in staging the dynamic historical and social contexts surrounding the work of Athey, as well as keeping alive and making visible and present the world-building engagements and traces left by Athey's work. As Jones writes, in *"Queer Communion:* Ron Athey exemplifies one way of thinking about curating live art in a way that explicitly foregrounds "context." Not only does the show include, for example, a cluster of snapshots, flyers (some with Athey's scrawled notes), and music from his period as a punk and queer club performer in the early 1980s and early 1990s, it uses the moment of the right wing "culture wars" of the mid 1990s, in which Athey's work played a role, to remind visitors of the larger cultural context." (Jones in this volume)

A traditional academic, authoritative and art historical approach to curating this kind of performance work is futile and would not do justice to the queer worlding it brings forward, Jones claims. Rather, a mixture of personal attentiveness and care, relying on performance studies', feminist ad queer studies methodologies, archive work that dwells both in personal histories and social networks, and contributions that reflect the intimacies and intensities of queer subcultural communities and

alternative art communities, is what a responsible curatorial strategy necessitates, "organized in such a way as to lead the visitor through a dynamic recursive chronology of his work, career, and friendships." (ibid.)

Anastasia Proshutinskaya also responds to the difficult questions about curatorial responsibility, both in relation to the dancers' works and practices it engages with, and the wider socio-political exigencies through which curator's and dancer's work are embedded. The major difficulty faced by the curator is the invention of strategies and discourses that would refuse the reproduction of already existing forms of knowledge and sedimented ideas, agendas and prescriptions. As Theodoridou in this volume, Proshutinskaya also finds, imagination, in her case imagination as fantasia, as a key term that can lead us out of the impasse of making "art politically, in context, and yet constantly multiply, blur and relativize all the references and messages." More importantly, she brings also a critical attention to the ambivalences that this concept carries, especially in the present neoliberal capitalist imperatives and demands for invention and imagination, without however throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Imagination, she urges, has to be framed as a strategy of resistance to the hegemonic media forms of dematerialization, and hence, revitalize its deep connection to matter, the materiality of dance being a particularly fecund field from which we can draw our strategic moves. If the pressing question for a curator in the performing arts today is the Leninist dilemma of *chto delat*, contributing towards suggestions of freedom, freedom of conscience and of imagination, and expressing an utopian, yet imaginable and acceptable future "that would direct and energise diverse efforts of art practitioners," is what our temporary and possible answer could be.

Jasmina Založnik's text reflects on her ongoing curatorial practices enmeshed in the joys of collaboration, co-curation and co-producing events and festivals, as a way out of egotistic, author-obsessed and individualistic practices of hegemonic curation. Drawing on the historical heritage of art and curatorial collectives from socialist ex-Yugoslavia and their strategies of dramatization and anonymity (Dječaci, Autopsia, Laibach, NSK etc.), as the context in which her cultural work is situated, Založnik sheds light on the "fertility of dialogue as a means of a spontaneous, evolving form, mutual enrichment and learning that leads to personal and collective growth extending beyond language and representation," (Založnik in this volume) and surpassing the brutal individualism that governs our mediated cultures and realities. Working as a collective body, as a team of co-curators, brings a certain number of difficulties, complexities and demands, as well as ongoing risks, uneasiness and the need for adjustments and experimentations; all of which have to be carefully addressed and reflected upon. Some of the principles of collective work and co-curation are what Založnik's text tackles, such as the need for a common vision and aim, the essential importance of nurturing relations of trust, respect and dignity, "thinking, feeling and moving along with others," opening oneself towards transformation, confronting coexisting differences, questioning existing formats and frames of curation, and devising curatorial intention that would "stimulate a debate that can push artists and its audience toward new lines of thought, maybe even to

empower them to shift, change or resolve in a different manner their research-processes, procedures or working frame(s)." What Založnik brings as a particularly fruitful proposal is thinking of festivals as landscapes that would make it possible for audiences to walk through its program, various chapters and moments as one walks through landscapes, where visibility, obviousness and meaning-making should not be necessarily immediate and available, and yet "the experience of watching, attending or simply just being in the presence of or within a festival can offer many unexpected surprises, shifts and turns which may happen in the least expected moments of the program or around it."

Rok Vevar is talking about the effects of the pandemic, but also about the political context which he names as the Slovene version of orbanization during the pandemic, pointing out that such a political context believes there's no more dangerous and subversive thing than arts and culture. Vevar goes through the cultural legacy of Yugoslavia and discusses how culture and art has been supported by the political establishment at that time, but also how it has been denied nowadays. He gives examples of how post-Yugoslavian (Slovenian) nationalism works, and of the lack of value offered to art from the period of Yugoslavia through the scandal when the Embassy of The Republic of Slovenia in Rome refused to support the exhibition of *Bigger Than Myself: Heroic voices from ex Yugoslavia* at the prestigious MAXXI, curated by Zdenka Badovinac, the former director of the Modern Gallery+Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana.

Through his research and curatorial practice he relates us with the cultural world in the period between the mid-1970s and the early 90s, that can be seen through the lenses of Božidar Dolenc, one of the photographers at that time who were documenting cultural and art events happening in Ljubljana. Concerts, non-institutional performing arts productions and club culture events, including the first LGBT club events in Ljubljana in 1983, which marked the beginning of the LGBT movement in Eastern Europe, as well as contemporary dance and theater pieces at site-specific venues, on the streets or on institutional stages – they are all there, as Vevar says. But also on the photos are the defiant, emotional and expressive young people on the streets, the ones living on the margins, punks and drag queens and many more. His text is a curatorial self-narative: a text, which talks about the potential of artistic movements to transform socio-political contexts, and vice versa. Cultural landscapes created by/from the photography of Božidar Dolenc, Vevar also depict artistic legacies, processes and transitions, and their corelation to the context of ex-Yugoslavia and Slovenia nowadays.

In the third part which we have entitled "Reading Performative Dissensus" we look at the embodied subversions, political restaging and new imaginations that performing arts, choreography and dance help us envision and live through. We look at choreography as interventionist practice, that is to say choreographies of protest or as a "medium of protest, and "protest choruses" as a "new aesthetics of resistance." (Foellmer 2016, Donath 2018 in Maar in this volume) We tackle perspectives of dance as practice which establishes a contract between choreographic planning and its actualization in movement and destabilizes the regimes of disci-

pline and control, as well as how choreography and dance practices can challenge our institutions. Also, the ways in which performing arts, choreography and dance mobilize our disciplined, regulated and numbed bodies through the multiple forms of control in social choreographies, into unpredictable ways of being, relating and feeling by critically redistributing, rearranging and reassembling bodies, objects, images, sounds, words, media and discourses, while revaluing our constitutive ontological vulnerability, codependency, being-exposed and sharing in-common, as sources of both care and transformation.

Kirsten Maar's text looks at the points of overlap and intersection between forms of protest and political practices, on the one side, and performing arts and dance practices, on the other, by setting choreography's potential to assemble, arrange and assign human and non-human bodies, as well as to redistribute and reinvent bodies, affects and senses as core analytical problem. Working with Lepecki's use of Jacques Rancière´s differentiation between police and politics, as *choreo-police* and *choreo-politics*, Maar unravels the ambivalence implied in "the choreographic capacity to assemble as well as the vulnerability of the body on the street or on stage, its resilience and its unavailability is destabilizing the regimes of control and discipline." (Maar in this volume) She is specifically interested in choreographic works that mobilize the potential for *intervention in a minor key*, that is intervention on the level of micropolitcs and ecologies of practices that challenge the relationship between belonging and becoming, precisely through the staging of the precarious unavailability of the exposed, resilient and relational body, and the embodied archives of history, trauma, and collective memory. The serious theoretical investment in Maar's text is diffracted through her reading of four art projects, performances and choreographies, including Suzanne Lacy's *The International Dinner Party*, the largescale interactive performance installation *The Boarding School #6* by the Copenhagen-based performance group *Sister´s Hope*, *Corinna and Jörg* by Laurie Young, and *Moving the Forum*, a project initiated by the Berlin dance community in collaboration with new attempts to decolonize the institution.

Dominic Johnson's text offers a detailed reading of the experimental theatre show *Bogeyman* by the queer Iranian-American artist Reza Abdoh, by setting the piece in the intense, dynamic, horrifying, and complex socio-political and historical context, its critical relations to this milieu, as well as the multiplicity of voices and critical discourses surrounding its presentation in 1991. Abodoh's work demonstrates in great detail the various strategies that can be mobilized by performing arts in order to reactivate the critical and abyssal force of the political, by shattering the grounds of the violent social heteronormative, racist and capitalist imagination, and refusing to redeploy and thus reproduce the very political terrain on which it operates, nor its available forms, identities, discourses, bodies and affective normativities, and yet to penetrate deeply in, and appropriate critically the urgencies of the context. The shocking and violent references in Abdoh's work, Johnson argues, sketch a portrait of the violence, corruption, and oppression in the US and Los Angeles at the time, circa 1991: the AIDS crisis and rapid growth

of HIV related deaths as a result of governmental homophobia and inaction, the brutal murder by the police of Rodney king and the subsequent LA riots, the BCCI banking scandal that implicated the American government in money laundering and major fraud, the discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the historical atrocities of slavery and the Holocaust, the genocide in Bosnia etc. And yet, even more importantly, Abdoh's so called "angry" works, as Johnson argues, cannot be perceived as activist in the conventional sense within the hegemonic forms of political representation and critique. "Neither pedagogical nor didactic, they do not raise awareness, as such, or appeal directly for active solutions in the treatment or prevention of HIV/AIDS. Rather, Abdoh's works veered toward a confounding refusal of intelligibility and efficacy, incorporating ambiguous, ethically dubious, or otherwise challenging source materials, as if to actively interrupt the political viability of his interventions." (Johnson in this volume) Furthermore, Johnson argues that Abdoh's work pays tribute to and sustains the vulnerable and persistent queer worlds and subcultures, threatened by severe violence in the AIDS crisis. Those are the worlds of "club's sadomasochistic glamour," nonnormative socialities, genderfuck and extreme body practices, the anti-social queer zines that proliferated in California in the late 1980's and early 1990s, all of which were neither appropriated nor exploited by Abdoh, but were rather incorporated in his theater in such a way to "let a spirit of the underground loose in the theatre, so as to infect it, something like a virus."

The last part of the volume, or Untitled: Ghostly Future we see as a free and open space where many diverse examples of artistic dilemmas can be shared. We see Voin de Voin's work as a sort of free floating text, yet one that insidiously engages some of the core themes addressed throughout this volume; themes we found important to be presented and discussed with you as a reader. Voin de Voin tackles his research based performance work that deals with the complex issues of transgenerational trauma, and the ways in which violent and traumatic historical events leave their imprint at the very core of our bodies and our DNA through complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms. Cultural trauma experienced collectively brings the past into the future, the collective experience into individual bodies, the political memory into individual body cells and DNA material, exposing us all as bio-psycho-social and spiritual creatures, and testifying that the "psychological cannot be separated from the physical, and the physical and psychological cannot be separated by individuals, groups, social conditions, connections, and existence, and is therefore a consequence of the culture we live in." (Voin de Voin in this volume) Although Voin de Voin starts from his personal story and mental health histories, as well as their entanglement with wider socio-historical processes and histories of violence, he forces us to think through these various bio-political mechanisms as sources for critical engagement with the devastating experience of our contemporary capitalist predicament and its viral politics "where the mechanisms of neoliberalism operate as an apparatus of mutation," appropriating and disempowering the very projects devised for coun-

tering and resisting it. He asks “how do these conditions cause the left’s protest against these rationalities to end up reiterating their effects? Is it possible to re-analyze these effects through historical and inherited trauma?” The performance practice can serve as a site for sharing the powerlessness felt by each one of us, acknowledging it, and honoring the trauma we have caused to each other, while simultaneously inventing new relations and modes of affectivity and sensitivity; new forms of community starting precisely from the connection built through our mutual pain and vulnerability.

The story Voin de Voin tells is “a call for healing,” a call for poetry as a way of countering and destroying every last remnant of living fascism and social control. A call for artistic and curatorial, poetic as he says, staging of encounters between the inherited and lived trauma of the historical present, the ongoing violence and experience of slow death in the grips of exploitative capitalism, and the “unborn whom they address,” encounters of two worlds, of two senses, of two sensoriums, a past one and an emergent one, “of the here-and-now with the elsewhere, the hereafter; their death we live, and they ours.”

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THE POLITICAL,
THE CURATORIAL
AND *THE* PERFORMATIVE

Curation as Construction Site *for* Artificial Social Imaginaries

Danae Theodoridou

The discourse on curation as an extended artistic practice, in close relation to performance and dramaturgy, has been at the centre of interest of curators, artists and scholars over the last few years. This interest is visible in educational programmes such as DAS Theatre in Amsterdam, for example, which brings together performance makers and curators and invites artists to view their work as a curatorial practice and curators to approach what they do as artistic creation.[1] Similarly, several other research programmes and residencies, such as the international school Curating in Context, explore common concerns between performance and curation. In this frame, curation stops being understood merely as a display or presentation of artworks and is discussed more as the practice of creating frames that 'curate' -i.e. 'take care of' (following the etymology of the word) the gathering of artists, artworks and audiences in different formations; producing forms of art and sociability that suggest insightful ways to meet, think and act.

This text draws on such a line of thinking and on the work we have been doing for the past two years with the participants of Curating in Context, in order to examine the relation between curation (as the creation of extended artistic frames) and social imagination. More particularly, its interest lies in the way curatorial and performance practices that largely depend on the live presence of audience and the construction of human communities -even if only temporary ones- can act as construction sites for the emergence of alternative social imaginaries, especially in today's socio-political conditions in Western world. Although important social movements have emerged in the last decades -mostly in the non-western contexts of the Global South but also in various European cities- and although the current pandemic has emphasized even more strongly the need for solidary and collective social structures, the developments towards an effective common questioning of dominant social imaginaries able to overturn established conservative structures, remain slower than expected especially in Europe.

Two concerns render this investigation particularly significant at the moment: the first relates to the severe crisis of social imagination capitalist societies face today; the second has to do with the fact that the presence of arts in the emerging field of 'social imaginaries', a field primarily interested in this crisis, is a problematically limited one. The field of 'social imaginaries' is described as an interdisciplinary endeavour of scholars that wish to emphasize the important role of "creativity and the imagination, not only for the cultural-artistic sphere but for articulating responses to contemporary social issues" (*Adams and Smith, 2019, p. xxiii*). Although the strong connection of the term to the cultural-artistic field is explicitly recognized in the field's discourse, the major disciplines that participate in it are those of social theory, philosophy, history, political theory and sociology. The almost complete absence of arts from this discourse constitutes indeed an interesting paradox that urges us to draw particular attention to the orientation current art discourses take regarding the social and political value and role of art today, especially at a time when this value and role are being seriously questioned.

My analysis will be divided into four parts. It will start with a mapping of the current socio-political conditions in western world, characterized by a severe crisis of social imagination. It will continue with the impact these conditions have on performing arts, as well as with problematic understandings of the 'political' in art today; in order to move on to 'social imaginaries', discussing it as a term but also as a practice that can offer an important shift in the way we understand the social and

[1] https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/theatre-programmes/das-theatre/

political role of art today. In the last part of the text, I will attempt to articulate some working principles for curation and performance, based on a demand for more collectively speculative frames. The aim there will be to share some suggestions about the next steps we could undertake, as artists, curators and scholars, in order to build a strong discourse on the relation between art and social imaginaries and develop skills and methodologies to explore this relationship in practice.

Crisis of Social Imagination: societies of 'no alternative'

The *least* discussed crisis today, is not the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy, or environmental crisis etc. but probably the crisis of social imagination. As Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović have argued: "Perhaps, the social imaginary does not appear to be at all in decline in public debates, because we have not been aware of having (or losing) it." (Cvejić and Vujanović, 2016, p.35). Two important observations derive from this comment. The first is the fact that the crisis of social imagination does not appear at all in public discourses although it constitutes a severe crisis today, more severe perhaps than other more 'popular' ones, which in fact constitute its outcomes. In other words, crises such as the financial or the environmental ones, which are the those we usually encounter in the news today, are the result of societies that seem unable to imagine and create ways of living together based on values different from the capitalist ones. Nevertheless, we discuss *those* crises much more than the one that actually created them. The second observation, perhaps even more significant than the first one, relates to the fact that not only we do not talk publicly about the serious crisis of social imagination, but we may not even be *aware* that there is such a crisis going on.

Why is it so difficult, though, to think of a society that is not neoliberal-capitalist? London-based designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have attempted to reply to this question in an insightful way. Our dreams today, they have argued, "have been downgraded to hopes. {Today, we hope that}…we will not allow ourselves to become extinct, hope that we can feed the starving, hope that there will be room for us all on this tiny planet" (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.1). But there are no more visions. We do not know how to fix the planet, we do not know how to dream collectively about changing things, we are just hopeful. Since the 1970s, according to Dunne and Raby, a series of key changes in the world (such as the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of real socialism in Eastern Europe, the triumphal victory of market-led capitalism, the individualization of society etc.) have made imaginative, social and political speculation more difficult and less likely. After the failure of the one existing sociopolitical alternative in the western world, the socialist one, and following the broader frustration that accompanied the decay of the great dreams of the twentieth century -including the social imaginaries that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the USA- we now seem unable to imagine and produce visions for our present and future; to create new dreams for the twenty first century.

At the same time, in the few cases where such collective dreams and alternative models may still emerge today, these are either immediately appropriated and exploited by capitalist systems that can turn them into profitable products in a speed faster than light, or else they are dismissed as unrealistic fantasies. In other

words, anything that does not align with the dominant lines of neoliberal thought today is something not to be taken seriously. Margaret Thacher famously argued already that 'there is no alternative' and in contemporary policies in Europe and beyond (including those of austerity for example), this seems to be more true now than ever.

Results of the crisis of social imagination in performing arts: rethinking the 'political'

Performance theorist Bojana Kunst has discussed the results such policies have on arts, while reflecting on the broader sociopolitical context. It is often the case in numerous European states today, she has argued, that we witness severe cuts in arts funding from neoliberal governments that question the value and role of art in the public sphere, arguing that the state should not support something that has no effect on the public (Kunst, 2012, p.71). In this frame, contemporary art is discussed as 'leftist elitism' with no public interest or influence. At the same time, artists supported by the state are considered as comfortably protected in their alleged 'laziness' from the self- regulating, dynamic market. Such arguments need to be urgently re-thought, according to Kunst. It should be urgently recognized that the arguments against subsidizing arts are part of a populist, neoliberal rhetoric that aims to profoundly erase any articulation of the communal and community in contemporary society. In this populist corporate language, art should be left to the decisions of 'free' individuals on the market, who will choose (i.e. buy) what they like or what suits them best, making connections in accordance with their own desires. Art is thus reduced to the result of individual choice rather than being something in the common good (Kunst, 2012, p.71). Even beyond the arts, of course, in the light of such populist rhetoric, any support and cultivation of a common good is viewed as political elitism by an engaged leftist circle. Against this background, in a more agonistic tone, Brian Massumi has sharply defined as our urgent task the uncoupling of value from quantification and the recognition of value for what it is: irreducibly qualitative, summarizing accurately the (re)action that needs to be taken against "purveyors of normativity and apologists of economic oppression" (Massumi, 2018, p.3).

Another revealing point in Kunst's insighful analysis, though, is the observation that the crisis in articulating art's value and social role appears more dominant after several decades of 'political art', when we have been repeatedly confronted with numerous socially and politically engaged artistic projects. In other words, today we witness the following paradox: the more art is obsessed with socially-related issues and the public sphere, the more its role and impact on this sphere is seriously questioned (Kunst, 2012, p.71). The problem here, as Kunst also notes, is quite complex. On one hand, populist arguments, such as those mentioned above, demand from us to radically reevaluate and protect what we have in *common*, beyond economic measurements. But, on the other hand, we will need to also critically reflect on problematic functions of the 'political' in art over the last decades.

For Kunst, the current politicization of art constitutes itself a symptom of the disappearing public sphere, of the fact that society is disappearing. Art deals with social problems but is constantly pseudo-active because the 'social' itself is

disappearing and we live in a time of radical powerlessness in terms of establishing together the kind of realities in which people's communities would be articulated. In other words, art can have no impact on the social realm because there is *no* such realm anymore to have an impact on. At the same time, though, art's pseudo-activity relates also to the fact that artistic production has also become part of the capitalist machinery. Following dominant modes of neoliberal production, artists today are asked to fully preplan their projects, project them always into the future, present the results of projects that have not even started yet and prove their full value, preferably monetary value, in advance, only to then be given permission and support to simply execute them. This leaves no space for experimentation, risk or imagination. And this is also why art loses its constitutive role in society, Kunst stresses. Instead of offering social and political alternatives, as is its main role, art today resembles more the treadmill of a gym, where artists constantly run among several projects, without reaching anywhere (Kunst, 2012, p.72).

Art historian Claire Bishop has elaborated further on problematic understandings of the 'political' in art (Bishop, 2011, online). It is often the case, she has argued, that artists wish to create socially and politically transforming processes -usually through vivid participation and interactivity- able to liberate us from our problems. In this frame, we often witness artworks that wish to take over the work of governments and deal with social problems in their place. This, of course, is exactly what neoliberal governments also seem to argue for, when they demand that art should have measurable/quantifiable effects on a social level. What is asked from artists in this case is to deal with significant social issues that politicians themselves are *not* dealing with -although this is really their job- while they (politicians) focus on 'self- regulating, dynamic markets'.

But to return to Bishop and art, artistic practices that aim at social impacts with 'transformative' effects, in fact denote a lack of faith in the power of art and the work of artists, which is not to solve social problems but to enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew, which means to speculate about alternatives and not merely reproduce what already exists. At the same time, seeing the art event and the sociopolitical event as indistinguishable, also expresses a serious lack of faith in politics and democracy itself, implying that the forms and structures these take, as well as all the fights undertaken in their name, are useless in themselves and art should take their place. Only when we make sure that distinctions between the artistic and the social, between the artist and the citizen, do not collapse, only when we do not lose faith in the intrinsic value of art as a third term that we need in order to communicate, only then can we actually start imagining another social and political realm, Bishop concludes. In a similar tone, Cvejić and Vujanović have argued that today "we often see brilliant critiques of neoliberal and individualist capitalism, but only rarely are other possibilities affirmed." (Cvejić and Vujanović, 2016, p. 36).

As one then moves closer to the current crisis of social imagination and its relation to performance and curation, one can detect some blind spots that obstruct art fulfilling the aim of addressing the public in ways that open space for reimagining our social coexistence and experimenting with social and political alternatives. On one hand these blind spots relate to the broader loss of the common world in frames that push atomization, fragmentation and specification of concerns and interests to their limits; and to the unbearable burden put on artists to 'make it' quickly and effectively, to continuously run without a clear destination, stressed and

panicked, on market-led treadmills, arriving nowhere while draining their capacity to (re)imagine the world.
On the other hand, though, such blind spots relate also to problematic understandings of the 'political' value of art, which connect artistic processes either with normative functions that aim to intervene, critique and -even more ambitiously- solve 'real' problems; or simply use/sell these problems in order to effectively take part in the capitalist market of artistic production with cynical reactions that prove one smart, "capable of navigating the 'system' and in that way superior to the others who are blindly overlooking the dark sides of the 'system' that they are part of" (Cvejić and Vujanović, 2016, p. 36). For both reasons, art needs to urgently redifine its function on the basis of the perception, recognition and establishment of the visibility of what we now envision and will envision *in common* and to engage actively with speculative processes able to offer new articulations of social imagination, affirming other possibilities of living together.

Social imaginaries as a term and practice

At this point, the notion of 'social imaginaries' becomes quite relevant for the discussion. Scholars such as Cornelius Castoriadis -perhaps the most prominent figure in the field- and, later, Charles Taylor, have used the term to refer to the imaginary significations that provide meaning to whatever presents itself as 'reality' in a society. While Castoriadis emphasizes processes of institutionalization in this respect -as processes par excellence to represent common views and values in a society- Taylor's approach is more quotidian, touching primarily on how people imagine the social world through their daily experiences. For the latter, 'social imaginary' refers to "the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Ch.Taylor, 2004, p.23). which of course differs significantly from one society to the next. Despite the different focus the two approaches may at times have, it is important to underline their pronounced turn to plurality in relation to imagination, which always addresses the common, the shared, the co-created. This comes in clear contrast to the equally important, albeit here less relevant, role of imagination as part of individual capacity, which may fuel social imaginaries but remains distinct from their complex, communal force and impact. "To put it bluntly", as Chiara Bottici has argued, "if imagination is an individual faculty that we possess, the social imaginary is, on the contrary, what possesses us" (Bottici, 2017, p.63).

In his *Imaginary Institution of Society*, a seminal reading in the discourse on social imaginaries, Castoriadis has argued that societies construct a series of imaginary values on which they base their institutional 'reality', and that no society can ever survive outside of the commonly agreed imaginary significations that constitute it, since these are the ones that orient the activity of the people who live in it (Castoriadis, 1987). Such imaginary-made constructions are, for example, language, the regulation of sexual relations, the existence of an authority within society and the way in which this authority is imposed and legitimized etc. Sometimes, Castoriadis notes, these imaginaries cannot even by any means be supported or justified rationally. In the case of religion for example, another important social im-

aginary, no-one can ever prove that Christian God exists but in a way even if one tried to do so rationally, it would not be of any interest (Castoriadis, 1984, online).

Benedict Anderson has insightfully argued that nations too constitute imagined political communities. Although the members of these communities will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the minds of each one of them lives the image of their communion, grounded on specific imaginary principles and values that make us 'British', 'Japanese', 'Greeks' etc. Subsequently, Anderson has noted that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but *by the style* in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 2006, p.6, my emphasis). If all communities, then, are imaginary ones, what matters in our approach to them (as curators, artists, art scholars but not only) should go beyond the (pseudo)conflict between more or less 'rational', 'irrational' or 'imaginary' social structures, and focus instead on the *how*; on *the way* social imagination is constructed and used in different communal social constructions. I will return to this point later.

The merit of Castoriadis discussion on 'social imaginary' at this point, though, is that he reveals the utterly significant role that imagination plays in processes of institutionalization.

As he has argued:

> "When it is asserted that the imaginary plays a role with respect to the institution only because there are 'real' problems that people are not able to solve, this is to forget [...] that people manage to solve these real problems [...] only *because* they are capable of the imaginary." (Castoriadis, 1987, p.133, my emphasis).

'Real' problems, for Castoriadis, present themselves in a society only in relation to the central shared imaginary values of this society. If those values were to shift and change, if that society would co-create its imaginary central values in *another way*, then those problems would either not have occurred in the first place or they would diminish. Such a radical approach in relation to the central role of imagination in the institution of a society is what distinguishes Castoriadis' 'social imaginary' from notions such as those of 'utopia' or 'fantasy', which are often used indistinguishably in relevant discourses.

Although philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur have referred to the ability of utopia to 'shatter' and recast reality, utopia for them still acts as a *variation* on existing reality, as "a place of distance from and critique of present social reality" (Ricoeur cited in G. Taylor, George, 2017, p.42). Utopia always carries the 'ou topos' in it, the unrealizable non-place that can never be reached, remaining hypothetical and distanced from society. And although it may offer invaluable forceful directions to social imagination, these remain horizons that, as we know well, cannot be reached. 'Fantasy', on the other hand, as Roland Barthes has noted, refers to the absolutely positive scenario that stages the positives of desires that know only positives (Barthes, 2013, p.4). If we think of the literally genre of fantasy, for example, we again arrive at fairies, magic forests and other supernatural, magical creatures and distant mysteries.

On the contrary, 'social imaginary' as a process of active instituting, in the way Castoriadis discusses it, constitutes a tangible, shared social action in this world that directly acts on society and has the potential to shift its established

institutions from within. In this sense, social imaginaries are not future-oriented but already present in a society as less visible -or even totally invisible yet- alternatives that have the ability to break historical time at unexpected moments, bringing forth other possibilities. In this sense, the emergence of social imaginaries can be seen as the action of practicing fractures, opening a different consistency of the social present, which is never closed but always subject to other ways of being together.

Castoriadis has also sharply emphasized such dynamic, mutual, continuous, complicated and full of potential relationships between an already instituted society – which transcends the totality of the individuals that compose it but which can actually exist only by being realized in the individuals that it produces– *and* those individuals who dynamically practice in common the redefinition of their society while being defined by it (Castoriadis, 1987). Similarly, George Taylor has characterized social imaginaries as 'paradigms in the making' (2019, p.xii), a description that also views such imaginaries as a social (co)doing, an ongoing shared questioning and experimentation that acts on the problematics of collective life, which can be significantly different from the individual experience.

If we tend to believe, though, that human societies are always co-practicing such activity, then we better think again, Castoriadis warns us. The social questioning of established ideas that relate to freedom, equality, the question of what is truth etc., is *not* self-evident.

The universal belief that human beings everywhere and always were promoting these questions (commonly known as the 'eternal' human questions) and were constantly seeking for replies to them, in fact constitutes a major historical illusion. Castoriadis reminds us that the ninety eight percent of human history and the societies we know -from Asian to Pro-colombian, from Byzantine to Medieval European ones etc.- accepted without question all social imaginaries that the institutionalized tradition of their time had imposed on them and raised them with, as criteria, values and purposes of life (Castoriadis, 1984, online). Human societies in general find it remarkably hard to develop a strong critical position towards their established social imaginaries and to actively question and re-institute them, and this difficulty appears perhaps even greater today, in the time of 'no alternative'. This is exactly why the need to find collective ways to overcome such incapacity becomes perhaps even more urgent than ever before.

The best way to do that, according to Castoriadis, is by counting on a society's creativity, i.e. on the creativity of the specific individuals that institute this society, which he defines as the major threat to established institutions (Castoriadis, 1987, p.133). In this frame, Castoriadis urges us to observe the characteristics of the very few societies (such as the Ancient Athenian one) that managed to work with their creativity in ways that reformed themselves significantly. One such characteristic was, for example, the fact that in those communities, 'civil society' was itself an object of instituting political action. Through their wide participation in it, citizens actively co-created 'public space' not in the way we understand it today, as an increasingly privatized, surveillanced space, supposedly 'open' and 'accessible' to all, but as a political domain that belongs to commons; a domain where the community takes decisions on common affairs. Even more importantly, these decisions are not only 'final decisions' but include also everything that leads to them. In other words, in societies that actively (re)institute their social imaginaries, whatever is of importance has to appear publicly, citizens have to educate themselves in public thinking and speaking *in practice*, i.e. through their participation in such processes,

which are not to be left in the hands of 'experts' (Castoriadis, 1983, p.277). Active constitution of alternatives is thus an essential part of the emergence of social creativity, according to Castoriadis. As he has noted, the Athenians:

> "did not find democracy amidst the other wild flowers growing on the Pnyx, nor did the Parisian workers unearth the Commune when they dug up the boulevards. Nor did either of them 'discover' these institutions in the heaven of ideas, after inspecting all the forms of government, existing there from all eternity, placed in their well-ordered showcases. They invented something, which, to be sure, proved to be viable in particular circumstances, but which also, once it existed, changed these circumstances essentially – and which, moreover, 25 centuries or 100 years later, continues to be 'present' in history." (Castoriadis, 1987, p.133)

It is exactly at this point that Castoriadis also brings the subject of art into the discussion. Similarly to what happens in social instituting, he posits, "art does not discover, it constitutes; and the relation between what it constitutes and the 'real', an exceedingly complex relation to be sure, is not a relation of verification." (Castoriadis, 1987, p.133) Art does not verify reality, it does not mirror reality, it does not reproduce it. Art makes reality, it constitutes it. Art is part of reality too. Moreover, it is a reality that primary counts on imagination for its constructs. And it is exactly for this reason that one could argue that art, especially performance and the curation of live events that largely depend on a live encounter with an audience, constitutes a public frame that can contribute significantly to the reactivation of the dynamic relationship between the instituted and the instituting social imaginary in the time of 'no alternative'; and, thus, to the emergence of alternative social imaginaries today.

Working principles for collectively speculative processes in art

The aforementioned ideas and concerns make it clear that at the centre of attention in the performing arts should be questions such as the following: How can we address the public today in order to reactivate common social imagination and shift 'instituted' realities? How we can work in order to construct narratives able to assist the emergence of alternative social realities? What are the tools and methods needed today in order to shift the 'style'*specific* communities imagine to other directions? Below, I will attempt to articulate some working principles that could be seen as a first approach to such questions:

1. The first principle relates to the specificity of each distinct sociopolitical context arts places itself. *Locality* plays a decisive role in art's effort for collective speculation. In order for 'counter- imaginaries' to be revealed, curators and artists have to focus much more attentively on the particularities of the specific context they create and place their work in. The time of the type of globalization that es-

tablished the ‘successful’ careers of numerous ‘international’ artists in Europe and beyond -to the extent that it often makes no difference if one attends a festival in Brussels, Vienna or Berlin- while imposing on them a life style full of exhausting movement around the world (where you meet many but you actually connect to nothing and no-one) seems to have come to an end, especially after the pandemic. It thus becomes even more obvious that such a superficial, market-led approach can no longer correspond to current needs. Bruno Latour has insightfully discussed the ‘inside’ perspective in his recent work (Latour, 2018, online). According to him, there is an alarming social and political danger in the dominant ‘global’ perspective that views Earth ‘in general’ from outside, far and above, missing the complexities that constitute the social imaginaries of each one of its communities, which are particular to that community only. And he has insisted on the need to shift our attention to the micro-level and the complexities of its ‘inside’ as soon as possible.

Such demand goes a step further from the older demand of conceptual art and other art genres to question the artwork as an autonomous object and approach it in relation to its context (mostly the financial and institutional context of its production). Here, the need is to look more carefully outside the window of the art venue or the studio. Moreover, this look should not be ‘in general’ but should examine and rework with concrete (i.e. also limited) elements of that context. This means that artists and curators need to create open structures that will allow the ‘inside’ work to come in dialogue with what lies ‘outside the window’, which means developing structures that can change and become different in relation to the particularities of that ‘outside’.

2. The second principle derives directly from the first one. If the need is to observe and work with the complexities of locality, we will definitely need to develop much stronger *skills of attention* for such a task. During the recent ‘POST-DANCEING’ conference (2019), Jeanine Durning talked about “a virtuosity of attention and a virtuosity to attending to those details that are not seen and do not take discernable form” and she has defined art as “the word we use for the kind of attention you can bring to where you are, rather than where you want to be or where you think you should be”, emphasizing once more the value of the complexity of the local here and now (Durning, 2019, online). Konstantina Georgelou has also discussed the relation of art to attention especially in times that demand quick eyeballs that constantly engage, process and evaluate, training us masterfully in a continuous process of surfing the surface. In this frame, the need to re-skill ourselves, as makers and audience, in spending time exercizing contemplation and navigating through the world, becomes prominent (Georgelou, 2019, pp. 94-95). Performing arts that act as sculptures of (more or less expanded amounts of) time within the frame of their events, constitute the ideal territory to (re)train our ability to understand, practice and reconfigure attention and the temporalities involved in such a task. The creation of structures that provide insightful frames for attentive approaches of the ‘style’ in which our communities are and can be (re)imagined, could therefore be seen as another necessary principle of work. Important aspects to pay special attention to in this case, for example, could be the space an event takes place in and the modes of sociability this enables; the processes that precede an event and the participants’ entrance to it; the forms that will take place in its duration; participants’ exit from it; the way the event will continue after its end and the processes other common spaces could inherit from it.

3. The third principle relates to the quality such attention should have and there are certainly several ways to understand and (re)work this within specific socio-political contexts. As already stated, one could argue that 'political' art has focused exactly on such a task especially during the last decades. Bishop, for example, has referred to the term 'social practices', used in the USA for artistic modes interested in intervening in social contexts. In such practices, the aim for immediate, tangible outcomes as results of artistic interventions, demands from art significant measurable impact on a sociopolitical level. I would like to make here a suggestion for a radical shift to less 'hopeful' and more 'unreal' or 'speculative' artistic interventions.

I referred earlier to Dunne and Raby's scepticism towards 'hope' and to the fact that our dreams today have been downgraded to 'hopes'. I would now like to elaborate a little more on that view. Under the provoking title 'Fucking the Regime of Hope in Choreography', choreographer Malik Nashad Sharpe recently argued that although hope is necessary for humans as a territory that hosts their 'good', 'useful', 'positive' sides, and is needed to attain a state of optimism, this state can also been seen as a dangerous and rude one, especially for those who suffer most in this world, as do the people of colour for example (Nashad Sharpe, 2019, online). Aligning with the views of Dunne and Raby, the choreographer has posited that hope often fails to address things or shift things in the world, while discouraging immediate action. What if we take a radical performative turn, though? What if art can actually do nothing about dismantling or disarming hate, nothing for challenging established forms of approaching things that we do not understand? What if we were not hopeful?

Once we move away from the limiting promise of hope, once we enter a politics of hopelessness, we might be able to at least start articulating ways to expand the possible. If social imaginaries are already present in a society, ready to crack the surface and pop up at unexpected moments, then art needs to practice in the fractures through which such appearance will take place. This will not happen via 'hope' nor via a normative approach that will reply to 'real' problems. In neoliberal times that demand from us to produce in 'effective', 'profitable', 'rational' ways, we have to respond to with frames that move against dominant social intensities; ways that do not 'produce' something, that do not offer 'good solutions' to anything, that move less 'properly' and more imaginatively. In other words, we have to reply speculatively by finding ways to crack things open. Drawing on this principle, art cannot and should not wish to produce ends nor wrap things up in neoliberal ways. On the contrary, it should work for the im-possible, not in the utopian sense, but more in terms of aiming to expand the possible by revealing what lies under it and could become its alternative. Approaching artistic curation and creation as the construction of the im-possible, 'unrealistic' artificial processes, structures and narratives means cultivating the unfinished thinking of emergent communities regarding *other* possibilities in this world. Placing such local, attentive act *between* the normative and the fictive can offer speculative, imaginative (micro)shifts to the possible. While gentle, such shifts also gently work against what is expected of people when they are together. From thereonin, other imaginaries can pop up...

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Empty Stages, Crowded Flats
Performative Curating Performing *Arts*

Florian Malzacher

Let's start with an image: Two or three lonely people scattered around midnight over the art deco auditory of Vooruit theatre in Gent. Meditatively leaned back in their plush seats under balconies and ambitious ornamentation, quietly watching the half-lit stage underneath the golden letters emblazoned on the proscenium like a motto: "Kunst veredelt": art ennobles. On the stage itself nothing but some bunk-beds, a few people sleeping, one is snoring, another one just undressing.

The German choreographers Kattrin Deufert and Thomas Plischke put this unlikely, modest spectacle in the centre of their curatorial project B-Visible, a programme consisting of performances, lectures, and other interventions loosely dispersed over the course of 72 hours, taking place everywhere in the theatre – except at its heart, the main stage, the default centre of attention. Here it is all silence, a refuge for anyone who wants to take a break.[1]
B-Visible laid out what it could mean to understand curating in performing arts differently than just programming a couple of shows within a season. How even classic theatre spaces can be challenged when approached and confronted in their site specificity – and in their conventions of time. By using their limitation as productive frictions (with regard to the architecture: by reversing its logic) and at the same moment taking them radically seriously (in terms of time: After all, theatre buildings are constructed to keep the daily life away – so why not ignoring the real time of the outside world completely).

deufert&plischke played with this very core element of theatre – creating an experience for a temporary community in relation to time and space – by using them as their main means for curating. There is much more to gain than most festival or seasonal programmes try to satisfy us with.

"Diaghilev, the most important curator of the 20th century"

Whether the term curating – obviously borrowed from visual arts – is the best choice in the context of live arts can be discussed. But within the specific field of performing arts I am referring to (a theatre that refuses to be defined by the borders of drama, of conventional divisions between performance and audience, of the imposed limitations of the genre and that finds itself mostly outside of the fixed structures and relatively fixed aesthetics of the repertory city theatres, which are mostly active only within the limits of their own countries and languages) terms, concepts and definitions are a problematic issue in any case. Already the question how to name the genre (performing arts, experimental theatre, post-dramatic theatre, devised theatre, live arts, conceptual dance etc. etc.) is a subject of great confusion. Why I do believe in promoting the concept of curating on this highly contested aesthetical playground lies precisely in the expectations it raises: Expectations that pose a clear challenge to everyone calling him/herself a curator. A distinction not for reasons of hipness or prestige but with the aim of signifying a shift in understanding the possibilities and claims of programming arts as well as understanding it as a performative task itself.

The fact that the figure of the exhibition maker – primarily and almost synonymous with the new type of curator: Harald Szeemann – became so impor-

[1] B-Visible, curated by the choreographers Kattrin Deufert and Thomas Plischke together with the dramaturge Jeroen Peeters, took place at Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Gent/Belgium in in November 2002

tant in the 1970s is due not least to the fact that the concept of the nature of an exhibition radically begun to change. Following the increased interest in performativity within visual arts since the 1960s (in the forms of performance, installation, happenings etc.) exhibitions became more alive, were accompanied by events, sometimes changed after the opening… New forms of time and space experiences were developed – art-shows created their own dramaturgies. Szeemann compared his work quite early with that of a theatre director, Beatrice von Bismarck recently underlined the proximity of exhibition-making to the job of a dramaturge, and Maria Lind speaks of her practice as "performative curating". Since the 1990s, art continued these traditions with a new force by expanding the exhibition framework and discovering itself as a social space.[2] It is hardly possible to penetrate more deeply into the neglected core business of the theatre.

Using the concept of "curating" within performing arts only makes sense when meant to emphasise the possibilities of an expanded definition of what theatre is and can be and if programming itself is understood as part of the medium theatre. Significantly, for Hans Ulrich Obrist, one of the key figures of contemporary curating in visual art, one of "the most important curator of the 20th century" was someone from the field of performing arts: Sergei Diaghilev, the famous impresario of the Ballets Russes. "He brought together art, choreography, music… Stravinsky, Picasso, Braque, Natalia Goncharova… the greatest artists, composers, dancers and choreographers of his time."[3]

"Programme-making" (like exhibition making before the curatorial turn in visual arts) generally understands each art work, each performance as an independent artistic expression that is supposed to live on its own. The programmer primarily provides the stage for the artists' endeavours, enables it, tries to offer the best conditions, communicates it to the audience etc. Lately these loyalties have often – for obvious reasons – been contested and shifted towards a loyalty to the institution – festival or venue – which is threatened by lack of subsidies or political attacks. Saving the institution is now often seen as the ultima ratio.

Curating performing arts for me would not mean to ignore these points – the artistic work itself obviously has to stay in the centre, and saving the institution one is responsible for is obviously also not a bad idea – but to shift the emphasis in order to make room for another aspect: The necessity of putting works into a larger context, to make them interact with each other and the world around them, rather than seeing them as entities. And to offer a collective experience not only during or within the performance itself, but turning the festival, the event, the venue into a larger field of performative communication.

Keeping and loosing control

To understand the specific situation of the international independent theatre scene it is crucial to understand that it is a quite young phenomenon, that mainly begun in the 1980s when radically new aestheticisms, and later also new working structures and hierarchies within ensembles, collectives, and companies came into existence along with new or newly defined theatre houses such as Mickery in Amsterdam, Kaaitheater in Brussels, de Single in Antwerp, Hebbel-Theater in Berlin, TAT (Theater am Turm) in Frankfurt, Teatergarasjen in Bergen, Ménagerie

[2] Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined for this in the late 1990s the term "relational aesthetics".

[3] Hans Ulrich Obrist „Diaghilev is the most important curator of the 20th century". In: Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupajić & Petra Zanki (Eds.). Curating Performing Arts. Zagreb: Frakcija: 2010. 44.

de verre in Paris and many more. Additionally, festivals like Eurokaz in Zagreb, Inteatro in Polverigi, Festival d'Automne in Paris and later KunstenfestivalDesArts in Brussels, as well as the professional network IETM, offered new possibilities for a dense international exchange. Above all, the concept of the Belgium kunstencentra like Vooruit in Gent or Stuk in Leuven (which, with their open, often interdisciplinary approaches, replaced conventional ensemble theatres) spilled over into neighbouring countries and made it possible to reinvent theatre as an institution.

With them arrived a new, often charismatically filled professional profile: that of the programme maker. As the name already shows, the accent was on "making". A generation of men of action defined the course of events – and even if their attitude seems occasionally patriarchal from today's point of view, the scene was actually less male-biased than the society and the city theatres around it. This generation of founders, which at the same time redefined and imported the model of the dramaturg, established some remarkably efficient and stable structures and audiences: it was a time of invention and discovery, which has had obvious repercussions into the present day. Professional profiles were created and changed – including that of the artist.

This foundation work was (at least in the west) largely completed by the mid-1990s and what followed was a generation of former assistants, of critical apprentices so to say, and with them a period of continuity, but also of differentiation, reflection, and well-tailored networks, of development and re-questioning new formats – labs and residencies, summer academies, parcours, thematic mini-festivals, emerging artist platforms...

The picture is still dominated by transition models, but the strong specialisation of the arts (exemplified by the visual arts), the subsequent specialisation of the programme makers and dramaturgs, and a generally altered professional world – which also here increasingly reliant on free, independent, as well as cheaper labour – along with increasingly differentiated audiences, again require a different professional profile: the curator is a symptom of these changes in art, as well as in society and the market. His working fields are theatre forms that often cannot be realized within the established structures; artistic handwritings that always require different approaches; a scene that is more and more internationalised and disparate; the communication of often not easy aestheticisms; transmission and contextualization. Last but not least, the curator is the link between art and the public.[4]

While keeping in mind the possibilities curating performing arts can offer for the artistic work as well as for the audience, it cannot be ignored that presenting works of live art is dominated to quite a degree by pragmatics. Performances are not paintings, easily transportable artefacts, or at least clearly defined installations. Few exhibitions have the complexity and unpredictability of a festival. As a social form of art, theatre will always have a different attitude towards pragmatism and compromise, will need more time and space, and therefore stay inferior to other genres regarding agility. In an age of speed and spacelessness this feature might now be a market flaw, just as it was an advantage in other times. But however small the possibilities of contextualisation may be within a festival or a season, they can also be very effective. The fact of not-being-able to control is a challenge that must be faced in a productive way.

Programming – as curating – is about selecting – a selection that might be contested, that in the end refers to specific discourses and also to taste, opinion.

[4] For a more extensive reflection on the different conditions of curating in visual and in performing arts, as well as criteria, relation towards the market etc. see also: Florian Malzacher, „Cause & Result. About a job with an unclear profile, aim and future". In: Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupajić & Petra Zanki (Eds.). Curating Performing Arts. Zagreb: Frakcija: 2010. 10 - 19.

On one hand there will always be the accusation of being to narrow (mainly coming from audiences, critiques, artists that don't feel represented by those choices). On the other hand many programmes of theatres and festivals are so wide that they seem arbitrary, the reasons for the choices made become even more vague, unclear, hidden, imprecise. Because the arguments for keeping it somewhat broader are numerous, and all programme makers are schooled in them: not excluding any segment of the public, creating contexts, placing more audacious pieces alongside more popular ones, visitor numbers, ticket sales, tolerance towards other artistic approaches, financial difficulties and more. Indeed, it doesn't help anyone if a curator wants to prove with his programme primarily his own courage – eventually at the cost of the artists. To establish and maintain a festival or a venue, to bind an audience, to win allies, and thus to create a framework also for artworks that are more consequential, more audacious, and more cumbersome is important. Especially since free spaces for art are becoming fewer and fewer, and the struggle of all programme makers for the survival of their programmes is becoming tougher and tougher.

And yet, what is the use of maintaining that which should actually be maintained if it is no longer visible? If it is no longer legible? What is the necessary and compellable in the midst of the pragmatic? The model of the curator is also a counter-model of the cultural manager, who values many things, who stakes off a broad field of creativity and artistic activities, whose aim is, after all, socio-cultural. Curatorial work also means deciding clearly for oneself what is good and what is bad. And knowing why.

But a good programme does not consist simply or necessarily only of good performances. On the one side, the decision in favour of co-productions and against merely shopped guest performances is immensely important in terms of cultural policy. But it is also a decision filled with risk, the results imponderable; the right decisions can lead to a bad festival if one reads it only with respect to its results rather than its endeavours. On the other side, it is about creating internal relationships – even if a festival does not give itself a thematic red thread. Whether a programme is well thought-out depends on a combination of different formats, aestheticisms and arguments within a nevertheless very clearly outlined profile. But it also depends on the supposedly more pragmatic, but often no less dramaturgical considerations, which can play a considerable role in the beauty of a programme. It can indeed happen that a performance is simply too long for a particular slot. Or too short. Or needs a different sort of stage. That it is the wrong genre. Thematically or aesthetically too similar to another show. Or too different. And yet, if it is worth it, one will probably find a solution. And yes, one must also fill in the slots: young, entertaining, political, conceptual, new, established... But there is also this: as soon as one stumbles across a piece that one wants to present by all means, one will quickly forget about this basic structure.

The curatorial

Several related interest shifts in recent art discourse fall together: The increasing attention in visual arts for the performative, for choreography and theatre. The new focus on the curatorial in performing arts, emphasising the specific means of

the medium. And what Claire Bishop influentially describes as a “social turn”: The growing attention of artists for collaborative practices, and for the participation of the public, that leads to an art “in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theater and performance”.[5]

All these aspects come into play when we try to describe the curatorial in the performing arts: The “curatorial”, a term used by scholars like Irit Rogoff or Beatrice von Bismarck, is not identical with the job of curating. While “curating” is widely seen as a professional set of skills, techniques, activities and practices, used to create a product (like an event, an exhibition, a festival), the curatorial is considered by Beatrice von Bismarck as something wider into which the activities of curating feed: “Curating is a constellational activity. By combining things that haven’t been connected before – artworks, artefacts, information, people, sites, contexts, resources, etc. – it is not only aesthetically, but also socially, economically, institutionally, and discursively defined. I understand it less as representation driven than motivated by the need to become public.” Compared to this “the curatorial is the dynamic field where the constellational condition comes into being. It is constituted by the curating techniques that come together as well as by the participants – the actual people involved who potentially come from different backgrounds, have different agendas and draw on different experiences, knowledges, disciplines – and finally by the material and discursive framings, be they institutional, disciplinary, regional, racial, or gender specific.”[6]

Irit Rogoff additionally and in slight difference focusses on the level of practice with the question “how to instantiate this as a process, how to actually not allow things to harden, and how to create a public platform that allows people to take part in these processes.”[7]

A “dynamic field”, “a process, how to actually not allow things to harden”, already these descriptions make clear how much the concept of the curatorial is thought as performative. And how much the fear of something that might look too “complete”, too much like “a finished product” already is a constituting part of all live arts, where the permanent proximity to failure, chance, mistakes and – as already mentioned – loss of control and compromises are not seen as necessary flaws but rather as the core of the theatre medium: “What’s specific to the theater”, Heiner Müller used to say, “is not the presence of the living actor or of the living spectator, but rather the presence of the person who has the potential to die.”[8]

Many curatorial concepts in performing arts therefore push the risk of failure in order to make it tangible for the audience and create a special tension of aliveness. Expanding time might be such a push (playing with strength, exhaustion, boredom, enthusiasm of the collective body of the visitors), a density or complexity of space might be another one. But also the confrontation of works that might not be compatible at first sight creates a tension and openness through their friction.

Theatre is the space where societies always have always explored their own means, procedures, ideals and limits. Theatre is, as Hannah Arendt states, “the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere transposed into art.“[9] Making this productive also in the creation of a curatorial field leads to Chantal Mouffe’s concept of agonism, a political concept that aims at showing different positions in struggle and disagreement (in opposition as well to Marx’s conception of materialism which would end in a harmonic society). By using the concept of agonistic pluralism Mouffe enables us to think about democracy differently: Not as a necessary or even possible consensus but rather as something which allows the

[5] Claire Bishop. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London and New York: Verso, 2012. 2.

[6] Beatrice von Bismarck & Irit Rogoff. „A conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck“. In: Beatrice v. Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski (Eds.). Cultures of the Curatorial. Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2012. 24-25.

[7] Beatrice von Bismarck & Irit Rogoff. „A conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck“. In: Beatrice v. Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski (Eds.). Cultures of the Curatorial. Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2012. 23.

[8] Heiner Müller in conversation with Alexander Kluge: http://muller-kluge.library.cornell.edu/en/video_transcript.php?f=121

[9] Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition. University of Chicago Press, 1989. 188.

possibility of conflict to appear. Democracy is the arena where we can enact these differences. Like the concept of the curatorial is thought as performative, the concept of agonism almost seems like paraphrasing theatre. Not by chance it draws its name from agon, the game, the competition. We need playful (while often very serious) agonism to prevent an antagonism that ends all positive negotiation.

Without neglecting the obvious problems in transferring a concept of political theory into the realm of aesthetics: The idea of a curatorial, performative field that keeps things in flux and enables a playful (but serious) enacting of different positions is the, perhaps slightly utopian, vision of what curating in performing arts should aim for.

Challenging Spaces

Theatre still is mostly bound to certain spaces reserved exclusively for its practice: proscenium stages and black boxes. But even in the most conventional settings an awareness of the specificity of the space can produce artistic or curatorial added value: How does the audience enter the space? When does the performance actually begin? At the entrance door of the theatre? In the foyer, in the auditory? What difference does it make when I have to enter a different way than normal? Is it part of the performance or mere pragmatics? What are the rules of the theatrical contract in this case?

Even conventional theatre spaces are not neutral. On one hand they provide necessary technical equipment, protect the work from unwanted encounters with the environment around, enable concentration, protect the artistic clarity etc. On the other hand these spaces themselves define largely the possible outcome. Not only are they limited in terms of architecture and possible spatial arrangements but they also represent a certain idea of institution as it was mainly formed in the late 18th, early 19th century. Their inherent structures not only reproduce certain conventions of what theatre is supposed to be but also a certain image of society. They frame and often tame artistic as well as political visions. It is therefore no surprise that many curatorial projects in the field of theatre either leave these predetermined spaces or try to challenge them (as Deufert + Plischke did with B-Visible).

The hype around site specific works mainly from the mid-90s onards put a special focus on space, by leaving the theatres and occupying supposedly non-artistic spaces, searching for something authentic or wanting to contradict the seemingly authentic. This move into the city (and very often to the outskirts of the city, to empty industrial areas, half ruined factories, vast storage places…) is closely linked to the desire for the real which is behind all strands of so-called documentary theatre, which only a few years later became so extremely popular, as well it fits in the logics of gentrification, at least symbolically occupying spaces that were reserved for others.

Using the designated areas of theatre against the grain or even abandoning them not only challenges the institution but the artistic work itself by showing the limitations as well as the possibilities of the genre as such. Working conditions get messy or even tough, chance might take over, the audience has to be organised differently and technical possibilities are limited. Site specific work cannot just transfer the logic of a theatre venue into another spatial situation. It needs to be more than a mere reaction to the situation, a pragmatic response that deals with

the disadvantages or adapts initial plans just as much as necessary. Site specific work gains momentum when it adapts the logic of the circumstances, pushes them or purposely contradicts them. It needs to be context responsive and make the space as such (and not only a limited portion e.g. in the form of a set) part of its form and content – but not by surrendering: Obedience towards the space easily creates boredom – when narration, atmosphere, movement, space etc. come to close to each other, it might result simply in a semantic shortcut – and all artistic tension is gone.

Apartments & Stadioms

One of the most famous site-specific curatorial projects in performing arts – X Apartments by the German dramaturge and founding director of the influential Berlin HAU theatre, Matthias Lilienthal – actually has an even more famous predecessor: For the iconic exhibition *Chambres d'Amis (Guest Rooms)* curator Jan Hoet convinced, in 1986, more than 50 inhabitants of the city of Gent to let artists work in and with their apartments. His concept of "displacement", which he later also used for documenta 9, aimed for the shifts in perception that happen when something is experienced in an unusual context. He removed the art from the exclusive gallery spaces it usually is bound to: "I am disturbed by the idea that art is here, and reality is there, separated." In *Chambres d'Amis* one should "have the impression that you are in the work, not just in front of it."[10] Each artist (among them Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Mario Merz) used one or two rooms to create a work that reflected the surrounding environment. Since these were apartments in use, encounters and discussions with the owners were an integral part of the concept.

While *Chambres d'Amis* exclusively featured works of visual art, it very well created its own performativity by triggering the imagination of the visitors: the walks between the flats enabled very different individual narrations and dramaturgies, and in the private settings in the apartments were just as open to interpretation as the artworks themselves.

Matthias Lilienthal enhanced this aspect years later with X-Apartments by commissioning mainly theatre directors, choreographers, performers (among them Fatih Akin, Pawel Althamer, andcompany&Co., Herbert Fritsch, Heiner Goebbels, Jonathan Meese, Peaches, raumlaborberlin, Meg Stuart, Anna Viebrock, Barbara Weber, Krysztof Warlikowski etc.) to invent small performances within different apartments.[11] By introducing a time structure – the audience stays for the whole time of each short apartment performance and then wanders on while the next group arrives – it collectivises the experience for the visitors. Not only the different "venues" themselves, also the bodies moving from space to space are part of this experience which is more than the sum of the performances. X-Apartments plays with the spirit of an expedition, it connects the audience, which is arbitrarily mixed and might not have known each other before. In the best cases these small scenes, interventions, installations create their own fantasies about the flats, their use, their inhabitants, and extend the "real" settings into the field of imagination or artistically framed documentary approaches. The less successful sequences on the other hand tend to fall into the trap of inherent voyeurism or they rely mainly on fetishizing and exoticising the lives of members of other social groups or classes.

While the quantity of the flats, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the shift

[10] "Avant-Garde Art Show Adorns Belgian Homes". The New York Times. August 19th, 1986.

[11] Initially invented for the festival Theater der Welt 2002 in Duisburg, the format proved to be so successful and adaptable that since then new versions took place in cities such as Berlin, Caracas, Warsaw, Vienna, Sao Paulo, Johannesburg or Istanbul, often with different co-curators and collaborators.

of perception towards every day settings are key in X Apartments, Polish curator Joanna Warsza chose for her project Finissage of Stadium X (2006 – 2008) a venue with symbolic power: The 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw was built in 1955 from the rubble of the war-ruined Polish capital. It stood for the idea of Communism and a new Poland – but by the Mid-80s it was abandoned and became a modern ruin itself. New life was brought by Vietnamese and Russian traders that took over as pioneers of the newly arrived capitalism. The open-air market Jarmak Europa became the only multicultural site of the city, a realm of informality and discount shopping as well as a paradise and work camp for botanists.

The heterogeneity of the site, the usually invisible Vietnamese community, the debates around the new national stadium built for the European soccer championship 2012 and the lack of a critical debate on Poland's post-war architectural legacy inspired the three years Finissage of Stadium X. It included an acoustic walk around the Vietnamese sector (A Trip to Asia, 2006), Boniek! a one man re-enactentment of the legendary 1982 Poland-Belgium soccer match by Massimo Furlan (2007), or the Radio Stadion broadcasts by Radio Simulator and backyardradio (2008), subjective excursions guided by artists, activists into the stadium that no longer existed. In this project the venue itself was the main protagonist – not only the mere architecture but also the symbolic role it played for Warsaw (and by this almost being a metaphor for the changes that Poland underwent).

A building as performance

An almost ironic twist to the notion of site specificity brought the project The Theatre by architect Tor Lindstrand and choreographer and theorist Mårten Spångberg. Their long-term interdisciplinary project International Festival, created in 2004, positioned itself somewhere between theatre, choreography, architecture and curating. Playfully and sometimes subversively they isolated and investigated different aspects of what a festival consists of: The Welcome Package for example, commissioned by Tanz im August in Berlin 2004, was an "extended bag", seemingly like the ones many festivals give to invited artists to provide them with information and some presents: "The 18 objects of the package were designed in order to produce a heterogeneous attention to the conventions and economies of festival"[12], for example by giving each participant a different DVD to encourage exchange after watching. Or IF Perfume (2005) for Kaaitheater in Brussels: Small bottles of perfume were given to the audience without further instructions. "During the event, which consisted of works by over 50 choreographers, the fragrance was spread and used by the audience, the use created an intense sense of space, community and intimacy."[13] The idea of curating not only other artists but also performers and even other festivals, was consequently radicalized with IF Plastic Bags, thousands of plastic bags with the IF logo given by International Festival to theatre venues all over Europe for them to use and to distribute – and thus creating an "open script for a potential choreography of 25.000 performers, a kind of inter European dance performed through our everyday movements."[14]

For the steirischer herbst festival 2007 the International Festival developed there by far most ambitious project, building a complete venue as a performance and as a curatorial statement: The Theatre originated from the idea, that theatre originally was public action in public space (and today is mostly turned into

[12] http://international-festival.org/node/3
[13] http://international-festival.org/node/4
[14] http://international-festival.org/node/56

a private action in a private or semi-private room). It was an attempt to revive the old machinery by re-enacting theatre as such by building a theatre. The development of The Theatre was accompanied by a series of workshops involving different artists, architects, theoreticians etc. – itself a kind of social performance with open result. The Theatre turned everything what in theatre is not theatre into theatre – including the 12x12 metre flexible stage. As important as this conceptual trick, which enabled a different view on the notion of space by turning it into a performance and by this into a time based art work, was the disinterest in the things that normally would also have played an important role: The aesthetics of the architecture were rather generic and pragmatic – and the programming of the space mainly delegated to the festivals curators.

Living Exhibitions

Escaping the highly determined and symbolically loaded spaces of theatre might mean ending up in spaces that are even more determined and symbolically loaded: the white cubes of museums and galleries. The increasing interest in all kinds of "living exhibitions" in the last years has many reasons, some as profane as trying to get into other markets or into discourses with seemingly higher prestige. But for most artists and curators the initial motivation is still close to Hoet's idea of "displacement". By changing the institutional, aesthetical and architectural frame, the grids of perception and reflection change was well.

Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has been for many years one of the main protagonists in integrating performative aspects into visual art exhibitions. Since the 1990s he has collaborated with choreographers like Meg Stuart and Xavier Le Roy[15] , and later has produced several time based shows, as Il Tempo del Postino in 2007 (together with Philippe Parreno)[16]. Tino Sehgal, probably by far the best-known contemporary artist inserting live arts into museums and galleries, produces his work always on the line between choreography and visual art – and much of his thoughts on performance are shared by Xavier Le Roy, who collaborated with him in Project (2003). In 2012 Le Roy showed for the fist time his live exhibition Retrospective, "an exhibition conceived as a choreography of actions that will be carried out by performers for the duration of the exhibition."[17] Le Roy uses the format and genre of a retrospectives to re-visit material from his solo choreographies by letting the performers re-create their own memories and stories connected to them. And he emphasises the moment of time by producing frictions between the different time experiences that are brought together: The time span of his revisited oeuvre, the time spent by each visitor, the working time of the performers, and the duration of the whole exhibition which creates with its permanent changes an own dramaturgy. Retrospective "compose(s) situations that inquire into various experiences about how we use, consume or produce time."[18]

But while in Retrospective time is a key consideration, for many other live exhibitions it seems to be rather an accessory: As much as Obrist verbally stresses his interest in duration, looking closely at his time based curations, the real potential of aliveness seems rather neglected: 11 rooms (co-curated with Klaus Biesenbach) for example is an exhibition placing eleven live art works in eleven white cubes: the performances are clearly framed as works of arts – like objects in a rather old fashioned exhibition. The performances last the whole day throughout

[15] E.g. In Laboratorium (curated together with Barbara Vanderlinden), Antwerp 1999.
[16] A timebased group show with Liam Gillick, Tino Seghal, Tacita Dean, Carsten Höller, Olafur Eliasson, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and others.
[17] http://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?sp=2d6b21a02b428a09f2ebd3d6cbaf2f6be1e3848d&lg=en
[18] http://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?sp=2d6b21a02b428a09f2ebd3d6cbaf2f6be1e3848d&lg=en
[19] The project was shown as 11 Rooms at Manchester International Festival in July 2011with works by Marina Abramović, John Baldessari, Allora and Calzadilla, Simon Fujiwara, Joan Jonas, Laura Lima, Roman Onák, Lucy Raven, Tino Sehgal, Santiago Sierra, Xu Zhen. Later editions took place in Ruhrtriennale, Essen/German (12 Rooms, 2012), Public Art Projects, Sydney/Australia (13 Rooms, 2013), Art Basel, Basel/Switzerland (14 Rooms, 2014). For each edition, the artists list partially changed.

the duration of the exhibition. But the conventions of watching are challenged. Maybe the time of watching is longer than the infamous average 30 seconds devoted to each art work in most exhibitions – but there is no interest in creating a durational experience for the visitor, not even in the durational experience of the performer, the changing of his body, his attitude etc. It is durational, because that's what the classic format of exhibition demands. For Obrist and many of the artists he works with, the main interest is to replace objects with people – not to develop art works consisting of people. The approach is (with some exceptions) mostly sculptural or spatial: The material is the human being. Or as Obrist says himself: 11 Rooms is "like a sculpture gallery where all the sculptures go home at 6pm."[20]

Too long, too short, too fast, too slow

But time is a more powerful tool than this. Non-dramatic or post-dramatic theatre for example "instead of employing a fictional Welt-Zeit" (thus pretending a different time-reality) insists "on constituting onstage time and space" (Hans Thies Lehmann). "What's special about this kind of theatre is the orientation of the whole theatre situation towards the relationship between players and audience".[21] Theatre in this understanding is not necessarily defined through a story, through fiction, through make-believe and dramaturgical arches etc. (even though it can have all this) – it is defined by creating a temporary shared reality. And this is an opportunity also for performative curating.

Truth is concrete[22] was an ambitious curatorial project happing in September 2012 in Graz, Austria, in which we (the curatorial team of steirischer herbst festival) attempted to push this notion to an extreme. The starting point were the strong impressions of the role of artists in the political turmoil all over the world (from Tahrir to Syntagma, from Zuccotti to Taksim Square, from Japan after Fukushima to Moscow during the wave of demonstrations, from London, Budapest, Athens, Istanbul, to Ramallah, Tel Aviv, Tunis, Rio…) and the open question of what role artistic strategies could play in these situations. Perceived well before the Occupy movement began and happening shortly after its first anniversary, the Truth is concrete-marathon camp brought together more than 200 artists, activists, and theorists. They were joined by 100 students and young professionals, as well as by a local and international audience, meeting on the small but common territory of art and activism: a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week marathon camp with 170 hours of lectures, performances, productions, discussions to pool useful strategies and tactics in art and politics.

The marathon machine ran nonstop—often too fast, sometimes too slow—all day every day and all night every night. It produced thought, arguments, knowledge, but it also created frustration and exhaustion. It used time as a tool to create an extreme social experience. But wasn't it by doing so just a mirror or even a fulfilment of the neoliberal agenda of more and more, of extreme labour and permanent availability? Did it not just prolong the race we are struggling with in our capitalist environment? Wouldn't it be better to slow down, to take time?

Truth is Concrete aimed in the opposite direction. Taking a break was not going to help. This machine did not set a task that could be fulfilled. It could not be easily commodified, nor easily consumed. There was no right time; it wasn't built

[20] http://www.mif.co.uk/event/11-rooms

[21] Hans-Thies Lehmann. „Shakespeare's Grin. Remarks on World Theatre with Forced Entertainment" Not Even A Game Anymore. The Theatre of Forced Entertainment. Ed./Hg. Judith Helmer & Florian Malzacher. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2004: 114.

[22] Truth is concrete. A 24/7 marathon camp on artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art. steirischer herbst, Graz/Austria 21.- 28. September 2012. Curated by Anne Faucheret, Veronica Kaup-Hasler, Kira Kirsch & Florian Malzacher (idea & concept).

around highlights. There were no best couple of hours to grasp it the right way. So there was actually not one marathon, but many individual ones: some shorter, some longer; some searching for depth in familiar topics, others searching for things one had no idea about yet. Having to miss out was part of having to make choices.

In this way, it was also a metaphor for political movements: spending an hour or so at Occupy Wall Street, you would talk to some people, see some tents, maybe smell some of the spirit. You come back, listen in to some committee meetings, maybe next time start talking yourself. Or you move in. All is possible, but it will give you different intensities and insights. Truth is concrete was not only interested in the intellectual intensity it produced. It was also interested in physical intensity. In the impact this meeting had on our bodies. In the here and now.

It was as mechanic, as rigid, marathon running in the centre: surrounded by a camplike living and working environment developed by raumlaborberlin —a social space with its own needs and timings, creating a one week community, mixing day and night, developing its own jetlag toward the outside world. The vertical gesture of the marathon machine was embedded in a horizontal structure of openness: with organized one day workshops and several durational projects and an exhibition, but most importantly with the parallel “Open marathon” based on self-organization: its contents were produced entirely by participants spontaneously stepping into the slots[23].

Performing Knowledge

If performative curating understands itself as creating framed social situations in space and time, then production and exchange of knowledge are key issues – and can be found in many of the already mentioned projects as a main purpose.

Also Boris Charmatz’ expo zéro (since 2009) falls in this category: As part of his Musée de la danse it is created as an exhibition, a living, a dancing, a talking exhibition – and a permanent exchange. Experts from different fields – choreographers, writers, performers, directors, theorists, visual artists, architects… – first spend four days in a kind of think-tank together and then open the space to the public, and present movements, thoughts, words… engaging with each other in verbal and non-verbal communications. What belongs in a Musée de la danse? Thinking the museum means at the same time creating it – a museum of dance can only be ephemeric (the “zero” in the title refers to the lack of objects).

Not a museum but a different kind of public space was created by Matthias von Hartz’s go create™ resistance (2002-2005), a series of evenings focussing on art and activism at Schauspielhaus Hamburg, one of the strongholds of Bourgeois’ culture. Or the Dictionary of War (2006/07)[24], a collaborative platform for creating 100 concepts on the subject of war: At four two-day events in Frankfurt, Munich, Graz and Berlin scientists, artists, theorists and practitioners presented their entries tot he dictionary as lectures, performances, films, slide shows, readings, concerts in strict alphabetical order as a marathon discourse. From ABC weapons to civilian population, from parachute invasion to facts on the ground, from potatoes to collateral damage, from info war to radar surveillance, from homesickness to

[23] There are obviously many other good examples for using time as a curatorial means: E.g. Matthias Lilienthal’s Unendlicher Spaß (Berlin, 2012 after David Foster Wallace’s novel Infinite Jest) stressed duration as well as site speficity: The audience followed for twentyfour hours from one scene to the other, partly by foot (mainly within the premises of a large Sport areal), partly by bus throughout the patina of the old west of Berlin.
The opposite approach – shortening the length of the performances to a minimum – was used in Tom Stromberg’s project for documenta x (1997): Theaterskizzen (Theatre Sketches) reduced the time for each presentation to a few minutes and thus reduced the possibilities of conventional dramaturgies: a task that almost only Stefan Pucher and Gob Squad with 15 Minutes to comply managed to use convincingly. Even shorter are the slots that the New York based organisation Creative Time – devoted to art in public space - offers at their annual summits: Just eight minutes each artist, theorist, activists.

[24] Dictionary of War was curated by the curators’ collective Unfriendly Takeover together with the activist collective Multitude e.V. www.dictionaryofwar.org

resistance. All entries were filmed and uploaded to a video dictionary that was later enlarged by further contributions in other cities.[25]

Maybe best known in the field of artistic and curatorial knowledge projects are the installations for knowledge distribution by Hannah Hurtzig: In her work theory and praxis, content and form are hardly dividable anymore. The Kiosk for Useful Knowledge for example – a format she originally developed together with curator Anselm Francke (a rising star among visual arts curators, originally coming from theatre) – is a "construction of public spaces experimenting with new narrative formats for the production and mediation of knowledge."[26] Professional knowledge and theoretical discourses meet individual narrations: The distribution of knowledge becomes graspable for an audience that is voyeur and witness at the same time of an almost intimate conversation. Two protagonists exchange their expertise in form of a personal narration, which we can only participate in in a mediated way by transmitted image and sound. A principle which is multiplied in the Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge, an installation for 50-100 experts on small tables. Here everyone can buy half an hour of intimate expert knowledge for one Euro from scientists, artists, hair dressers, fortune tellers: Facts, experiences, self-help or simply some insights into areas of knowledge completely unknown to you – knowledge that is always connected to the person who is passing it on. And in the way they are passed on: in all her knowledge installations Hannah Hurtzig is emphasising the perfomative character of knowledge exchange.[27]

No fear of the task

All these examples put forward a rather strong emphasis on the curatorial concept. To a large extend they define the artistic works they include, they chose, adapt, produce – and in some cases they even are artistic works themselves (as in the examples of Deufert & Plischke, Boris Charmatz, International Theater, Hannah Hurtzig etc.). Curatorial thinking starts much earlier though and can play a crucial role also in programming more conventional festival or venue formats.

So what can one see if one attends, on one evening, two clearly juxtaposed performances? How does it change one work retrospectively and the other in advance? (At least an exhibition curator rarely has the possibility of steering the order of reception so precisely.) What influence does it exert on the reception if a leitmotif or a theme is offered as the focus? What reference points can be given for an artwork – perhaps also historically, at least on paper or video? What contexts of experience are created for the spectators already by the very choice of space, the point of time, the graphic design, the advertising strategies? Is it possible not only to scatter theoretical postulates like parsley over the programme, but also actually mix them in?

This list can be continued, it gives only some arbitrary examples of how contexts and focuses can be created – if so through the elaboration of smaller sections or agglomerations/knots in the programme as

[25] Other projects devoted to the idea of knowledge production and exchange were e.g. the different conferences & workshops conceived for steirischer herbst's Spielfeldforschung (Playing field research) between 2006 – 2010 where theory confronted itself with different formats of art. New formats were developed that brought together theory and artistic practise on eyelevel and in proximity, e.g. the Walks in Progress (2006) that moved through the city as well as through the festival program. This concept was later developed further into Walking Conferences (2007 & 2008 – curated by Florian Malzacher & Gesa Ziemer). Or the 4th and 5th International Summer Academy at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt/Main – curated by Thomas Frank (2004), Florian Malzacher (2002 & 2004) Christine Peters (2002), Marten Spängberg (2002 & 2004) – invited the workshop hosts as well as all contributors to confront themselves with guests that they did not work together yet, or even better: that they always wanted to get to know. And to hand over to them part of the program. With this concept – inspired by Hans Ulrich Obrist's concept of "invite to invite" – they put themselves at least in regard of this uncertainty on the same level as other contributors. As well as the curators: Since the invitation was delegated to somebody invited and so the own influence was reduced.

[26] Dictionary of War was curated by the curators' collective Unfriendly Takeover together with the activist collective Multitude e.V. www.dictionaryofwar.org

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a whole. After all, biennials and museums are usually no adroit ships as well – and yet they play increasingly often with their temporal axis, with the idea of the performative, the social. So the attention towards an arch, towards constructive frictions or additions, towards a dramaturgy of programming is also an attempt at recovering lost terrain for theatre as a form of art. A course of events, a change of tempo, a change of intensity, a change of viewpoint. Even if barely any spectator can follow such dramaturgies in their entirety, they are nevertheless perceptible. One can walk through a festival as through a landscape. Some things are accidental, others are obvious. To linger or to go on, to grasp things intuitively or turn them over intellectually. The phantom of the über-curator, boldly creating his own piece out of other people's artworks, is not to be feared in the performative domain anyway. On the contrary, there is rather a lack of courage for imparting meaning at all – and not least because of modesty, but out of being afraid of the task.

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The Potentials *and* Challenges of Curating Participatory Art *in* Public Space

Suzana Milevska

The main aims of participatory art, to a great extent, overlap with calls for dismantling the pertinent hierarchies between “high” and “low” art and the distinction between the professional art elites and the general public. These are also some common arguments in favor of presenting art in public spaces. Moreover, art projects that include participation of different audiences, commonly dubbed “participatory paradigm” or “participatory shift”, simultaneously call for a certain doing away with existing hierarchies within the audiences themselves. (Milevska, 2006) Therefore the public space appears to be much more appropriate an environment for achieving such ends of participatory art than the galleries, museums or other art designated spaces subsumed by the common denominator “white cube.”

By deconstructing the hierarchies that have always existed among different social and economic classes and cultures, participatory art in public space, above all tends to refrain from - disfranchise and delegate further - the power of the art scene from its own institutions. This is not so different from what Foucault once called the “art of governing” or “governmentality” and the question of how to avoid “governing too much” or how to refrain from exercising and entertaining the acquired and available power. (Foucault, 1979, pp. 74-75). Participatory art and art in public spaces have become some of the major means for proving that such claims are truthful and sincere.

In the time of the dominance of intensification of communication through the social networks, YouTube, art blogs, portals and platforms, video game patches, and other ways of direct interaction, the public space becomes burdened with proliferated and enlarged images and becomes a fluid, dispersed, mediated, and relational phenomenon. Thus a centralized state apparatus cannot control it and there is no such thing as a unified concept that participatory art could easily reshape.

I refer here, more precisely, to Seyla Benhabib’s distinctions between different political traditions of understanding the public space. (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 89-120) She offers three interrelated but different concepts: first is the “view of public space common to the “republican virtue” or “civic virtue” tradition that she described as the “agonistic” (referring to Arendt, and not entirely in line with Chantal Mouffe’s conceptualisation of the term by Habermas (Mouffe, 2009, p. 66, p. 70); the second concept is provided by the liberal tradition and she named it the “legalistic” model of public space; the third model analysed by Benhabib (1992, pp. 89-91) is implicit in Jürgen Habermas’s work. Public sphere according to Habermas (1989, pp. 1-2) mediates between the private sphere and the sphere of public authority and by doing so it betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings. For Benhabib, however, this third Habermasian model “envisages a democratic socialist restructuring of late capitalist societies” and she names it “discursive public space.” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 90)

The distinction between different types of participatory art projects that comprise different registers, relations and issues of participation additionally complicates the general assumption that the participatory art and art in public space are inevitably linked through their similar goals. Particularly conspicuous is the weakness of this assumed link when it comes to the first type of participatory art: the one that is based on various waves of artistic and curatorial institutional critique, and which is concerned predominantly with hierarchies, inclusion and participations within the art system and art institutions. The participatory art projects of such provenience mostly deal with relations between the art institution (museum, gallery),

audience, artist, curator, etc. These projects mostly invite audience to participation that would attend the exhibitions anyway, and are not just passersby attracted by unusual movements, images or spectacular performances.

The second type of participatory art practice deals with the participation within a democratic society in general. It challenges issues such as social inclusion and intersection – with reference to ethnicity, gender, race, and class – of different communities and individuals. Such art practices aim to reach across all societal structures, not only within the art system. Thus the latter kind of participatory art is much more closely related to the determination to present art in the public space than the former. Most importantly participatory art in public space can produce previously unexplored indirect links and relations between different audiences where communication was possibly interrupted for various historic, political, or social reasons.

The main arguments of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002, p. 9) are related to Guy Debord's claim that our society is "a society where human relations are no longer 'directly experienced.'" For Bourriaud (2002, p. 16) the answer to this issue lies precisely in the direct relations that artists can establish through their art activities as "social interstices", which, according to him, is an effect of urbanisation. Obviously Bourriaud used the Marxist term *social interstice* as a space of human relations that suggests trading possibilities different than those in effect within the system.

The participatory art in public space needs to address a lack of the feeling of belonging to a common group, the failure to share a common identity that may even prevent a thorough participatory effect. I have to recall here some earlier warning to "the rise of the social" in Hanna Arendt's critique of the modern. Benhabib emphasised Arendt's anticipatory critique that the social occludes the political and that the public space of politics is transformed into "a pseudospace of interaction" in which individuals no longer "act", but, "behave" as "economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers." (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 90-91)

The claim that the political implications of any public space are mostly hidden also comes to mind:

> We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology. (Soja, 1989, p. 6)

One of the most relevant potentials of participatory art in public space is the potential to reveal its hidden historic, social and political implications. In its complexity it unearths different issues, while at the same time, regardless of its content, inevitably and reciprocally influences public space with its presence.

Finally I want to point to an evident paradox: that the participatory paradigm or shift in the art's focus from individually created art works through interaction with the general public may simultaneously create new hierarchies and differentiation (e.g. regarding collaborative authorship, collective copy rights, acknowledgments of the participants' involvement, participatory budget expenses, etc.).

Therefore participatory art in public space is not any more "immune" to all the conundrums and contradictions than participatory art presented in the professional art context and structures that enable it.

For example, once we add curating to the already complicated equation with all too many unknowns it becomes clear that due to the multiple possible intersections and directions the potentialities of participatory art for social change may be hindered from many sides. The position of curator does not always overlap entirely with the position of the artist, the host institution, the audience, the local or national government, the funding bodies, etc.

However the fact is that this genre and medium of contemporary art is a rare example of art practice that emerged and still has its focus on dismantling of the multilayered hierarchies of the art system and its institutions and where is better to fight this than in the public space and sphere. Therefore the role of the curator includes also the control over the multiplied tensions within participatory projects. In a response to various urgent issues related to contemporary art, culture, and politics, curating literally calls for bridging both the gaps and the incommensurable dissimilarities between differently conceptualized art practices (e.g., poor theatre, fine art, cartographies), while strongly opposing these hackneyed hegemonic forms of curating that impose themselves to the art of disenfranchised communities and "subaltern cultures."

While aiming to expand the curatorial field and reflect on its social relevance, curators advocating such a type of curating no longer see the exhibition as the ultimate format of their curatorial practice. As culminating manifestations, these curators rather assume the mere research process and, in parallel to their exhibitions, include theoretical critical formats as conferences, seminars, interviews, close reading workshops, projections, public debates, and various online events and platforms that are responsive to actual urgencies.

Overall, one could say that this is a kind of "felicitous kalokagathian curatorial practice" (Milevska, 2020) in which curators should perhaps aim for and correspond to a type of ethical curatorial agency instead of a bland form of managerial practice.

Curatorial agency is a concept that is even more directly indebted to the rethinking of the ethical role of curating in the context of contemporary art, culture, and society (Milevska 2013, p. 152 and pp. 164–165). Drawing on Alfred Gell's concept of "art as agency" (Gell, 1998), curating indeed can unleash and enhance art's power to act, instead of just passively representing the world.

Curatorial agency assumes that the curator is no longer considered to be a mere presenter of already existing artistic concepts and projects or to be dubbed the "author" of the exhibition. It acts as a social and ethical agency that entrusts its intellectual and theoretical capacities in curatorial knowledge production as well as art for social change and collaborations among curators, artists, and activists. It is embedded as one of the major cultural policy concepts in relation to the urgent need for cultural translation of lesser-known art and cultural traditions inevitably linked to the postcolonial critique and theory.

If conceived in this way, a kalokagathian curator is rather assumed as an active societal agent that contributes towards a cross-referential understanding of art and towards the rapprochement between different artistic, cultural, ethnic,

class, gender, and sexual camps and moreover, towards improvement of society in general by building the bridge between aesthetics and ethics. Such a practice does not require a particular figure who would master the intricate balance implied in kalokagathia, and it does not require a particular platform from which to speak and impose this harmony between the aesthetic and the ethics. It simply requires from anyone who ventures onto this noble path, a kind of social practice of shared learning and doing, one which suffers no top-down managerialism.

A felicitous kalokagathian curatorial practice is therefore an invitation to finally confront the modernist split that modernity instituted between ethics and aesthetics as well as rejecting art's aloof autonomy for the sake of the wellbeing of communities. There is thus still hope that curating's arrival on the art scene can renew our relationship to both the beautiful and the ethical, particularly through participatory art projects, both by mediating them with art institution and in public space.

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CURATORIAL IMAGINARIES *AND* STRATEGIES

Thoughts *on* "Curating in Context" *in* relation to *Queer* Communion: Ron Athey

Amelia Jones

The following was written as the introductory essay (entitled "Introduction: *Queer Communion* and the Worlds of Ron Athey") for the catalogue, co-edited by myself and Andy Campbell, accompanying the show *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, which I curated and which showed in New York City at Participant Inc (February-April 2021) and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (June-September 2021).[1] Here, I update it with a brief prelude contextualizing the exhibition and catalogue in relation to the theme of "Curating in Context," addressing a range of issues in relation to curating performing arts and pointing to how the Athey exhibition exemplifies one particular context for curating live art: the intersection of institutions based on displaying static objects (the gallery) in relation to a form of art that is time-based and embodied.

Most importantly, *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* represents the culmination of three intertwined interests of mine, all of which touch on the contexts of curating live art. First, my longstanding attachment with the challenging and intense, theatrical yet visually driven, BDSM performance art of Los Angeles-based artist Ron Athey. I tell the story of my acquaintance with the work and the artist below. Putting Athey's lifework on view is no easy task for the curator, but has to be excruciatingly difficult in some ways for the artist whose life is displayed. Ron* has never wavered in giving me the space to do this work, which thus involves personal relations as well as strictly curatorial ones. [*Generally speaking, I will designate him as "Ron" when writing about him as a friend, and "Athey" when pointing to his professional role as an artist, even though the two are most of the time overlapping and inseparable for me.]

Secondly, I am and was drawn to Athey's work not only because of the terror and beauty of the performances, but also due to the motivations and vitality propelling them; they bring together networks of creative queers and allies to create and socialize—in this sense, Athey's work could be said to participate in "queer worlding."[2] This social and creative context of Athey's performance practice is, in this sense, the underlying subject of the exhibition, which does *not* seek primarily to faithfully present a series of performance art works by Athey but, rather, seeks to evoke the energies of his "queer communion," signaling both queer community and the "communion" of Christian religious traditions Athey (trained as a Pentacostal minister during his childhood) often symbolically taps through his range of embodied iconography.

Thirdly, the exhibition specifically highlights the contexts and conflicts in curating a performance art career in a gallery context. Again, the exhibition does *not* presume somehow to represent in some wholistic or faithful way Athey's live performances, which would be impossible via the static forms required of gallery shows. It seeks, rather, to evoke the energies of Athey's life, career, communities, and performances—his queer worlding—through a range of still images and objects, props and costumes, and video footage, organized in such a way as to lead the visitor through a dynamic recursive chronology of his work, career, and friendships (I discuss this recursiveness as a curatorial strategy further below).

In this sense, then, *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* exemplifies one way of thinking about curating live art in a way that explicitly foregrounds "context." Not only does the show include, for example, a cluster of snapshots, flyers (some with Athey's scrawled notes), and music from his period as a punk and queer club performer in the early 1980s and early 1990s, it uses the moment of the right wing "culture wars" of the mid 1990s, in which Athey's work played a role, to remind

[1] Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell, ed.(2020), Queer Communion: Ron Athey Bristol: Intellect Press

[2] Here I leap off from the powerful theorization of queer worlding (with worlding a philosophical concept taken from the work of Martin Heidegger) by Martin Manalansan in "Queer Worldings: The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York," Antipode 47, n 3 (2015), 566-79. Important to note is Manalansan's emphasis on "voices from below," and his case studies are two Filipino working class queers living in the two cities. Ron Athey is working class but also a white cis gay male and hence cannot be aligned precisely with Manalansan's specific "subaltern" subjects, as he describes them. That said, the show and catalogue make abundantly clear the extent to which Athey's lifework—which explicitly evokes or enacts the join between violence and eroticism—is about "mess as queer" and "queer as mess," one of his key organizing concepts. Athey is not afraid to leave queerness and queer bodies uncontained and not fully defined, and his work fully exemplifies Manalansan's quite poetic claim about art as offering a form of queer worldmaking: "I take the notion of "art" in terms of bodily skills including the training of the senses. If art or more specifically aesthetics is about the working of the senses, then I take the sensorial as the building blocks for the creation of structures of feelings, emotional and affective regimes that inaugurate worlding as messy world-making and world-critique," (p 571.)

visitors of the larger cultural context (in this case, in the US with Republican senators using Athey's image on the floor of the US congress to whip up anxiety and opposition based on Athey's supposed "perversity"—in a strategy strikingly similar to the party's current attempts to garner their base by attacking critical race theory). It also contextualizes Athey's work, as noted, within a range of collaborators and friends, each of whom socializes with Athey and many of whom also participate in performances and/or build props, make costumes, film and photograph the work, or otherwise facilitate the production of his performances and their documentation. *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* is a show and catalogue evoking the vitality of a creative life, a career in performance art. But it also functions as a meditation on curating (live art) in context. I have great hopes that the exhibition and catalogue will provide an exciting and aesthetically, as well as politically, dynamic access to Athey's life and work as well as to his queer worlding. The reviews so far suggest that we have been successful in achieving this goal.[3]

Live Experience #1 and Following

It's 1994 and my friends Sheree Rose and Bob Flanagan have encouraged me to go to a BDSM performance at 18th Street Arts Complex in Santa Monica by their good friend Ron Athey. At the time, I'm in a fairly conventional marriage, living in central Los Angeles. Frankly, my boundaries are already being pushed by Bob and Sheree's collaborative work, which (thanks to Sheree's feminist energies) is edging into fairly mainstream, if nominally alternative, art spaces such as LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), where they performed *Issues of Choice* (about abortion rights) in 1992. *Issues of Choice*, assertively feminist, involved Sheree safety pinning plastic babydolls onto Bob's body, through his flesh, as he shrieked out the tortuously hateful words of Randall Terry, an influential antichoice advocate at the time.[4]

I would not have chosen to go and see Athey's piece on my own, nor would I have met Ron at that time without, already, engaging the Southern Californian queer community of which he had been a part since his teens. The piece was *Deliverance*, one of the "Torture Trilogy" series in an early manifestation, performed on December 7 as part of that year's "Day Without Art" series of events.[5] I remember the performance taking place outside of the complex's buildings, under a tent, in the dark chill of a Los Angeles winter night. I remember dimly an operating table with Athey lying supine, "nurses" hovering, and body lacerations taking place. The piercing of Athey's body got to me and I struggled to stay with it.

I easily suppressed my anxieties around the intense generosity of Athey's giving of his body, filing the experience away. I would see him around and about the art world in Los Angeles after that, and would say hello. I felt his majesty and charisma from those early moments, and a sense of awe. I have noticed in subsequent years that even those who know him well show a deference around him, and a desire to be loved.

In the early 2000s, my life shattered just after I moved to the United Kingdom with my two children and then-husband (who abandoned us). My body, my heart, my beliefs, my trust—all were full of holes; penetrated, severed, ripped apart.

I ran into Athey again as he was starting to perform frequently in the United Kingdom, and I witnessed his work many times. I flew to Ljubljana in December

[3] Reviews of the New York and Los Angeles versions of the show include: Christopher Knight, "'Queer Communion' and the engrossing, squirm-inducing world of Ron Athey," Los Angeles Times (July 9, 2021), cover of Calendar section (E1) and E2; Tavia Nyong'o, "Glory in Our Sufferings," Artforum (May 2021), 49-50; Coco Romack, "Glory in Our Sufferings," Artforum (May 2021), 50-51; Ksenia Soboleva, "Ron Athey: Queer Communion," in Brooklyn Rail (posted March 2021); available online at: https://brooklynrail.org/2021/03/artseen/Ron-Athey-Queer-Communion , James Hannaham, "Ron Athey," 4Columns (March 12, 2021); available online at: https://4columns.org/hannaham-james/ron-athey

[4] I wrote about this piece at the time: "If Men Could Get Pregnant...: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's Issues of Choice," New Observations 100 (March/April 1994), (pp. 21-26).

[5] See the Los Angeles Times write-up promoting the series at http://articles.latimes.com/1994-11-30/entertainment/ca-3230_1_aids-crisis/2; accessed October 15, 2018.

2004 to attend a performance festival, "Visions of Excess," which he organized with Vaginal Davis at Kodeljevo Castle. My body, already opened, received the work. Suddenly his entire aesthetic clicked in. The self-wounding made perfect sense, as I mirrored it back to his wounded flesh and heart. I found the visceral, extreme nature of his relationship to his body perfectly understandable and I even identified with his externalization of internal hurts (or so his wounding of self felt to me). After that point, I became passionately attached to his work and thus (as tends to happen, given his approachability and the coextensivity of his performing and everyday bodies) to him.

At the "Visions of Excess" event in Ljubljana, Athey and Julianna Snapper, a trained opera singer, performed *Judas Cradle* in the deconsecrated neo-Baroque nineteenth-century church attached to the castle. My heart broke yet again, but in solidarity; I felt less harrowingly alone. As I wrote in an extended hallucinogenic interpretive exposition on my experience of witnessing the piece,

> <EXT>While the woman [Snapper] flutters through a weird hysterical version of some bad, miscast 1970s BBC drama (with wispy ahs and huffs), the man impales himself slowly on the [Judas Cradle] pyramid. The searing agony of wood penetrating anus prostrates me (figuratively). He grimaces. I grimace. I hold my orifices tight. I am, inadvertently, determined to close myself after all. I am his pain, his fracture. He lifts himself off, moves ceremoniously through the crowd like a post-crucifixion Christ having risen from the dead (of pain).[6]</EXT>

And, again, on May 17, 2005, Athey and Snapper performed *Judas Cradle* in a more formal alternative theater space (the Contact Theatre, in Manchester, where I was teaching at the time).

> At one point Athey attaches a chicken-wire breastplate to his chest and smears lard on/in it, then smashes his body down onto [a]… low platform, sliding back and forth along the grease. A body skating on the thin ice of fat.
> My nostrils are assaulted with the smell of fat and sweat. My throat constricts. Groans, trills, howls barge their way into my formerly obedient ears. I can't, I can't refuse the incursion. I am permeable again.
> Deep...
> Throat...
> Close it on up. Make me clean again.
> I write in order to purge the chaos….
> *J[udas] C[radle]* is an extremely complex and intelligent meditation on the limits (or not) of the holy body. Watching it, I became a body of holes.[7]

Witnessing Athey perform in these instances marked a shift in my relationship to the world and to my own body. It is this capacity for worldmaking and for shifting concepts of self that defines the profundity of Athey's project. His body becomes *your* body if you are in a psychic place to receive it. The generosity of this project of public injury (where he hurts, hurts himself or has himself hurt, and shares with you) is like none I have experienced with any other artist whose work or person I have encountered.

[6] Amelia Jones, "Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's Judas Cradle," TDR (The Drama Review) 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): (p 162.)
[7] Ibid., 9p. (p.163).

Live Experience #2 and Following

Ron and I became good friends, Americans living together in the United Kingdom (he in London, I in Manchester) and then moving back to Los Angeles around the same time (2014-15).

In 2016, he hears rumors that his Los Angeles rent-controlled apartment of 25 years, his affordable haven in an increasingly priced out city, is in danger of being sold—the owner having passed away. He begins posting alarming messages on Facebook about throwing his long-accumulated archive of props, scripts, and miscellany out on the street and torching it all…. His rage at the carelessness, even violent refusal to care, of contemporary late capitalist societies is fully justifiable and understandable, but his posts put me on alert. As a scholar of past art and performance histories, I cannot let the archive go up in a billowing plume of smoke—no doubt rank and poisonous, due to a range of blood encrusted polyester, leather, and vinyl costumes, tapes (analogue and digital), and other noxious products involved in the costumes, props, and visual documentation. Along with others, my (as of 2007) husband Paul and I rush over and pick up the archive in several days' worth of loads. We help Ron scoop items from half-organized drawers into plastic bins; we assist in carrying metal filing cabinets, paper files, and box after box of costumes and props to Paul's truck and my car, and then to our house a few miles away.

The queen (king?) of the archive is the Judas Cradle. I laugh as Paul carries the item into the garage (formerly devoted to his woodworking workshop) for safekeeping, its menacing point jamming into his face. This is our life.

I now inhabit my home with a full array of archival materials spilling out of the small closet in my home office, with the Judas Cradle and boxes and boxes of props filling part of the garage, and large-scale artworks adorning the walls (Franko B.'s extraordinary needlepoint portrait and Lisa Teasley's gorgeous jewel-like painting of Ron).

One year into it I am alerted that the J. Paul Getty Center has confirmed acquiring his paper archive (after months of correspondence with me and Ron and others involved), without the props. In a panic, I now have two months to sift through everything and pull out all the items needed for the exhibition—otherwise, once the Getty takes things, they are forever swallowed into the cushy storage areas of one of the wealthiest museums and art history study centers in the world. I compile a checklist (frantically, with little sleep, and building anxiety), re-box the already haphazardly organized materials, and finally hand off about half of the paper archive to the Getty. Tellingly, they want none of the props or costumes. They deal in paper, which can be filed away. Bodily stains have no place there.

I live with the archive still, now, as I write… to my right is Franko's portrait, over in the office closet and in the garage are boxes of reorganized writings, notebooks, sketches, tapes, costumes, hundreds of photographs and snapshots (which peter out with the advent of digital imaging, around 2000), bric-a-brac, letters, and props…. To some degree, it feels as if I'm living *with* Ron, albeit sometimes a few weeks go by before I actually see him (now ensconced in another reasonable rental, shared by a friend who is often out of town). Sometimes I cycle over and we hang out, or he performs one of his world-famous body-work sessions on my aching soul and flesh. Other times we go together to performances or openings.

Researching an artist can be—often is—an intensely intimate act. All the more so if you live with the detritus of 50 years of their life; all the more so when they have become a beloved friend. In this context research is an honor, a burden, a fearful yet joyous responsibility. In *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (the show, programming, and catalogue), I attempt to pull all this (including my emotions) together into my own version of the interrelated histories of community and works relating to Ron Athey and his oeuvre. I sincerely hope my sensemaking project makes sense to you, reading this now, in the future. Most importantly, I hope it does *some* justice (albeit inevitably never enough) to the epically florid, passionate, complex, fraught, beautiful, even sublime, quality of this career, this life work: Ron Athey's queer communion.

Part I: The Idea

This exhibition began many years ago out of an impulse to honor the multifarious practice of an artist who has developed and perfected modes of embodied creative expression across theater, art, opera, music; poetic, diaristic, and prose writing; social media, performance programming, and more. I suppose it has to be admitted that, like dozens or even hundreds of others, I have a bit of a crush on the artist—the kind of crush that art historians and performance scholars develop when they can't get enough of an artist, witnessing his performances again and again, hanging around for drinks afterwards…. I transitioned (I hope) from fascinated observer (groupie?) to friend and then scholar of his work, attempting to place a little bit of strategic distance between us as I contemplated mobilizing this project.

That said, I've made it clear in introducing this catalogue with personal experiences of Ron's work that it renders an authoritative "art historical" approach impossible as well as undesirable (a performance studies approach might be more appropriate, albeit crossed with the insights of feminist and queer theory). An art historical approach (such as that beautifully extended and queried in Dominic Johnson's *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, which we consider complementary to this volume) would in this case have excluded the very voices we hoped would amplify the subcultural energies of Athey's performance and life practices.[8] The exhibition and this catalogue do not seek to frame his work in a traditional academic way. To this end, this "personal is political" framework is extended through my decision with my coeditor, Andy Campbell, to solicit other catalogue contributions that focus on the intimacies and intensities of "queer communion" generated through Athey's performances and central role in Los Angeles's alternative art communities. And, finally, the dirty, messy, personal approach culminates in our decision to center the book (literally) on Athey's own writings—from unpublished hallucinatory diaristic rants to examples from his regular late 1990s column in *Honcho*.

Nonetheless, here the historian in me takes over: Ron Athey has not only been one of the major figures in Euro-American performance art of the past 30 years; Ron Athey was not only the excoriated thorn in Jessie Helms's side, called out by the Senator on the floor of the US Congress in 1994; Ron Athey has not only been a wrench in the works of capitalism, producing viscerally embodied performances that defy easy categorization, display, and art historical codification; Ron Athey is not only a key actor in the glam/punk/post-punk Los Angeles music scene

[8] Dominic Johnson, (2013) Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey Bristol: Intellect Press.

of the 1980s; Ron Athey is not only an aficionado of BDSM clubs and a hot go-go dancer on the queer club scene; Ron Athey is not only one of the most important poets and performers of the apocalypse known as the AIDS crisis; Ron Athey is not only an impresario who, with collaborators such as Vaginal Davis, has organized cabaret and performance events around the world; Ron Athey is not only a charismatic movie star of radical queer alternative cinema; Ron Athey is not only the living embodiment of the most stunning queer appropriation of tattooing; Ron Athey is not only a sage and the friend and mentor to many a queer artist, intellectual, and creative person whether lost or found, who attach to him with awe, reverence, affection, and/or love. He is all of these things and many more, and has been extraordinarily prolific as an artist, writer, and contributor to numerous interrelated scenes of queer culture in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and beyond since 1980. Athey has circulated within and helped form a number of radical queer subcultures: as such he is a central energy source for the queer community or, as this exhibition title has it, *queer communion*, the coming together of sexually minoritarian subjects and their allies to form new modes of art and new cultural spaces where they can do their thing without harassment, or at least without immediate censorship and repression. These subcultures have, in turn, permeated outwards, sifting into normative cultural forms such as mainstream movies (take, for example, Athey's appearance as a seedy bartender in Barbet Schroeder's *Single White Female*, 1992). Or, in some cases, Athey's more mainstream persona has found its way back to the volatile and sordid edges of marginal productions: from Schroeder's nominally "Hollywood" film to Athey's 2000 appearance in *HotMenCoolBoyz*, Knud Vesterkov's porn film for Lars von Trier's Zentropa studio (an appearance that Athey parlayed into a feature in the July 2000 issue of the gay male porn magazine *Honcho*, which included Athey's article "Hot Male/Cool Boys: Shooting Diary").

All of these truths aside, a series of problems have haunted me in the organization of this show. Some, such as the obvious *how does one display live art and portray it in writing and catalogue form*? have haunted many projects in which I have been involved over the past decade.[9] How does one curate an exhibition of a performance artist who really (and truly) resists institutionalization? How does one fully honor the vast and complex creative input of a cultural innovator who extends, transforms, or simply shatters previous forms of expression, an artist whose vast lifelong body of work nonetheless (I felt then, and continue to feel now) urgently demands some kind of historicization to preserve a sense of the energy and emotional impact of his work so that the vitality of it is not lost to history books or (worse yet) the clamor of the internet? How does one theorize Athey's role in forming, extending, and commenting on various queer subcultural communities without romanticizing either the artist or the concept of queer community?

Organizing *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* has been an epic task, then. The difficulties crystallize around two sets of problems. First is in relation to the intensity, passion, profundity, messiness, recursiveness, complexity, and range of the artist's career (how to present, represent, or at least appropriately refer to all this?). Here and in the exhibition I and my collaborators make no attempt to document the entirety of Athey's career or to taxonomize the interrelations among performances (of which there are many). This would be a fruitless and ultimately impossible task and so this catalogue and the show are best seen as, we hope, powerfully suggestive gestures toward this complexity that bring aspects of it to life. Second is a related a set of problems clustering around the difficulties of how

[9] See Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, ed (2012),. Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History. Bristol: Intellect Press.

to exhibit work that largely took place in real time with live bodies. I don't need to belabor here the dangers of reification that haunt performance documentation and exhibitions of the medium.[10] These dangers are doubly acute with a performance practice that deploys extreme cutting, piercing, bleeding, bondage, and other forms of theatricalized suffering linked to BDSM communities. I will theorize some of the complexities and dangers sketched here, and outline the communities in which Athey has played a key role and which structure the exhibition and this act of historicization. Following this, I will outline the logic of the exhibition and describe its various organizational schema.

Part II: Queer Communion (and Community)

From the moment of his escape from his Pentecostal family in Pomona to the labs of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, where he was (not surprisingly) highly valued for his lack of squeamishness over the necessary execution of lab rats, and then the streets and punk clubs of Los Angeles, Ron Athey found ways to reform himself powerfully in relation to the culture around him, often reshaping it in return. We frequently find him very quickly at the center of the worlds he entered (see Lisa Teasley in this volume on how this happened during his internship at the Salk)—and by the time he was in his late teens, these worlds were explicitly queer. They were queer worlds, hinging on (as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described such worlds) "a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation."[11] Rather than being shaped by preexisting modes of gay male subjectivity or queer social space, Athey participated centrally in making and co-inventing whatever queer world he had entered, exploring and adopting some elements of them.

Many queer and queer feminist theorists have brilliantly expounded on the concept of queer community building or queer worlding, often in terms that borrow from political theory to stage queer public formations in opposition to that which seeks to marginalize or (worse) eradicate queer-identified people.[12] Thus, Marxist political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that any coalitional politics requires opposing an oppressive source of power; the "we" of a coalition must be distinguished from a "them," such that "[a] fully inclusive political community and a final unity can never be realized since there will permanently be a 'constitutive outside,' an exterior to the community that makes its existence possible."[13] Queer theorist David Halperin famously echoed this view of queer's political resistance by arguing, "'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*."[14]

This is *not* the queer that Ron Athey in his vast array of performative works has helped articulate. Athey has, by and large, not put himself forth to "resist" or "overturn" heteronormative social structures or political boundaries. The queer which Athey enacts is aligned more with Eve Sedgwick's sharp and two-sided definition where queer is both (in Sedgwick's words) "an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" and yet (as she continues) also

[10] See Ibid.
[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, (1993), Tendencies. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (p. 9).
[12] See Miranda Joseph's critique of the universalizing tendencies of claims of community, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
[13] Cited in Ibid.; xxviii (Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political, ed. James Martin (London: Routledge, 2013), (p. 111.).
[14] David Halperin, (1995) Saint Foucault New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 63); emphasis in the original.

a positionality that remembers the "contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression."[15] This kind of queer is mutable and relational, as Athey's work always insists even as it claims a powerful space for a white, HIV+, gay male body in its specific pains, pleasures, rages, and ecstasies. This kind of queer aligns with what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have called "criminal intimacies:"

> Queer and other insurgents have long striven… to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture…. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation.[16]

These two slippery and multifarious definitions sum up what Athey's performing body/self does across various queer communities and spaces. They also articulate Athey's generosity and openness to a range of modes of intimacy, all linked via his performing body through pseudo-religious BDSM visuals, rituals, strategies, props, and metaphors to criminal intimacies otherwise shut down by mainstream American culture, including (perhaps especially) the art world until very recently.

The idea of queer community goes back at least to the lesbian feminist sociological work of Esther Newton and Gayle Rubin, who might not have explicitly mobilized the term "queer" but whose work in the 1970s and early 1980s (such as Newton's influential 1972 ethnographic study of drag queen culture in US cities, *Mother Camp* and Rubin's influential 1984 article "Thinking Sex") pivoted around what Heather Love has termed a "protoqueer model of collectivity" emphasizing "shared marginality" and "collective stigma," based on the material conditions of people excluded from social spaces on the basis of their sex/gender identifications.[17] But as queers of color from Cathy Cohen to Josh Chambers-Letson have pointed out, ideas about queer community can also veil a liberal universalism that excludes otherwise minoritarian subjects from consideration or inclusion. Cohen notes that queer theorists and activists are often binary in their thinking: "Queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between the heterosexual and everything 'queer.'[18] And, more importantly for the case of Athey, Cohen rightly asserts that queer and other coalitional politics should align with "one's relation to power" and not "some homogenized identity," and she continues: "I am talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, … is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work."[19] Cohen importantly points out the way in which most queer theory is really about white urban gay men, veiling the class (and race) privilege that allows queer theorists to claim fluidity as radical.

Athey's queer communities are, surprisingly and emphatically, precisely punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens (as well as gay men and trans people of all sorts); they are comprised of bodies that are white, brown, and black. Athey's navigation of the class system in the USA is equally nuanced. Athey himself grew up in a poor white family in a largely African-American part of Pomona, a working-class town east of Los Angeles. And, while globally known among performance art afficionados, he continues to live at the far margins of capitalist society, always

[15] Sedgwick, Tendencies, (p. 8.)
[16] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," Critical Inquiry 24: 2 (Winter 1998), 558. Art and performance historians such as Julia Bryan Wilson and Malik Gaines have recently used the concept of queer community building to theorize historic practices such as those of the Cockettes. Both discuss the complexities of the Cockettes as a queer community and performance collective; see Bryan-Wilson, "The Cockettes' Crafty Genders," Fray: Art + Textile Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 42-71; and Malik Gaines, "The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life," Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left (New York: NYU Press. (2017), (pp 135-178).
[17] Heather Love, "Reading the Social," draft version—Love is tracing the tendency to focus on "shared marginality" and "collective stigma" to the Chicago School of sociologists and deviance studies, manuscript 4 (I am grateful to Love for sharing this manuscript with me); Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex" (1984), collected in her book Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), (pp 137-181).
[18] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997), reprinted in Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 21-51, this quote (p. 22).
[19] Ibid.

on the verge of being canceled out either by major art institutions or by landlords and tax collectors.[20] While queer community can be and often is claimed in a way that universalizes and excludes, that, per Lisa Duggan, is "homonormative" and, in Miranda Joseph's words, colludes with capitalism to "legitimate social hierarchies," it can also flourish organically out of queer practices such as Athey's myriad performance works and performative ways of being in the world.[21]

It is the strong claim of this exhibition and catalogue that Athey's queer communion consistently shifts and mutates, never residing in a singular site or way of being for queer subjects—and thus never acceding to the kinds of white dominant, capitalized, and socially restrictive modes of community that Cohen, Duggan, and Joseph identify as a problem. For example, Athey might himself get married (for immigration purposes) but he is not agitating to normalize gay marriage (nor is he campaigning against it, ratifying a certain form of queer negativity and thereby judging those who choose to unite in the law). His politics are in and through his work. Athey's queer communion activates what Cohen notes as "the radical potential of queer politics, or any liberatory movement, [which] rests on its ability to advance strategically oriented political identities arising from a more nuanced understanding of power."[22] None of this, however, is explicitly intended as far as I can tell. It is Athey's instinct to circulate, expanding and creating queer social spaces, bonding in pleasure with those attending, and thereby forming new alliances and nodes of empowerment—this becomes a political move in the sense that he gives others (and most likely himself) hope through forming bonds out of generosity and care.

Athey's role—his friends and colleagues who love him call him "Daddy Athey"—is maternal/paternal, pointing to the crucial power of queer communion to challenge the hypocrisies and breakdowns of the fantasized (yet never fully achieved) normative white, middle-class, heteronormative American family and its various authority figures such as "mother" and "father" (in spite of the loving honorific of "Daddy Athey"). Reaching for, establishing, celebrating forms of intimacy that are potentially both criminal and kinship-enacting, in Giulia Palladini's terms, Athey and his friends and colleagues form "queer
(anti-)families … [where] sexuality [is] if anything overexposed and form[s] … a vital dimension of everyday life."[23]

Part IV: Ron Athey's Archive

As Manalansan's work explores, queer lives are often compromised, messy, deeply resistant to neat categorization. So are, following these vicissitudes, queer archives. The above description of Ron Athey's living space, books, and things—turned into an archive by the pressures of the harsh real estate market—makes these mutual states of messiness clear. And any scholar of history feels especially blessed when she encounters an archive before the archivists (wonderful as they are) get down to business and make sense of materials that were being lived with, in, and through—but might well not have had any logical organization at all in their lived state. Can we even call materials from someone's apartment an "archive" if they have not been organized as such? The Getty will rationalize the archival materials, and force them to make a kind of sense they in fact do not organically hold.

Certainly, this archive is messy and confusing, as well as radically in-

[20] Jack Smith famously asserted a queer argument against "landlordism," whereby capitalist property owners make it difficult if not impossible for "marginals" to survive and make politically sharp work that cannot be easily commodified. See Dominic Johnson (2012), Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance, and Visual Culture (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2, (pp. 80-82).

[21] Joseph, Against the Romance of Community, vii-xxxvi; Lisa Duggan, (2002) "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson Durham, NC: Duke University Press, (pp. 175-194).

[22] She ends by noting, "[t]he process of movement building [should] be rooted not in our shared history or identity but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges" in Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," (p. 43).

[23] Palladini is writing of New York queer communities in the 1960s but her arguments apply to Athey's queer communities; in Giulia Palladini, (2017) The Scene of Foreplay: Theater, Labor, and Leisure in 1960s New York. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017, (p. 125).

complete (as noted, to cite one example, the masses of snapshots of friends stop in the early 2000s with the rise of digital and smart phone photography; and the snapshots tend to be dominated by select friends who, one assumes, clearly have a penchant for the camera). These quirks speak to the particularity of queer communities as well as of shifting technologies. In Ann Cvetkovich's study of queer lives, *An Archive of Feelings*, she theorizes that "trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive."[24] In this case, the trauma that Athey mines in his performances are manifold: from the systematic abuse he faced and witnessed among family members as a child, to his radical fear navigating his HIV+ status and watching friends and lovers die, and the difficulty of continually working at the margins of the art world's remunerative structures and being perennially on the verge of eviction.[25] As well, the messiness itself might be thought of as *queer*, an idea expanded by Manalansan in his 2014 article "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives." For Manalansan it is precisely the messiness of the everyday lives of queers that aligns with the messiness of their living/lived archives of stuff. Foraging through the apartment of a group of queer immigrants living in New York City, Manalansan revels in the mess in order to "locate discomfort, dissonance, and disorder as necessary and grounded experiences in the queer everyday."[26] Athey's situation makes it clear how useless a romanticization of this lifestyle as "bohemian" or "creative" can be in the face of actual poverty and continual precarity—Manalansan acknowledges this paradox, and points to the way in which mess can "gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness," while also revealing serious struggles to survive.[27]

Such ideas, born of the relationship to queer trauma and queer archives in Cvetkovich's and Manalansan's work, find resonance across queer theory—for example, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's interest in looking at "forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity."[28] These theories, then, provide a way of mobilizing the concept of the archive in the service of understanding the hinge between an individual life (here, Athey's) and the communities and collective activities relating to his life and work—which he has formed or helped constitute, and in which he has participated. As Cvetkovich and others have argued, shared suffering (or trauma) has often defined queer community—most obviously as precipitated by the AIDS crisis and societal homophobia, but in this case also through Athey's own family upbringing and shared experience with others who have been subjected to religiously motivated and/or family abuse. Such trauma, in Cvetkovich's argument, can bring people together and, in the most productive cases, through joined and complementary creative energies, can form alternative communities and publics that make a difference, sometimes between the possibility of survival and life and the otherwise inevitability of a harrowing hardscrabble existence at the margins and early death.

In fact, this dynamic very often takes place through *performance*, as Cvetkovich notes: "Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community."[29] José Esteban Muñoz explored this queer "worldmaking" as deeply connected to "queer evidence," which is often of political necessity veiled or coded—such that "ephemera" often serves as evidence of queer acts in history.[30] While Athey is arguably one of the best-known performance artists in the world, few art historians have written about his

[24] Ann Cvetkovich, (2003) An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures Durham, NC: Duke University Press, (p. 7).
[25] See Lisa Newman's poignant essay in Queer Communion: Ron Athey, ed. Jones and Campbell, (pp. 253-260). for more on Athey's precarity in relation to other performance artists.
[26] Martin Manalansan, (2014) "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," Radical History Review issue 120 (Fall), (p. 97).
[27] Ibid., 100.
[28] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," (pp 561-2).
[29] Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings. 9. For an exhaustive and intelligent account of discussions around the queer archive, see Andy Campbell, chapter one, "Introduction: Bound Together," Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming), and for a brilliant enactment of queer archives (specifically those of the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at University of Southern California), see David Frantz and Mia Locks, ed., Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980 (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, 2011).

practice, no one has ever exhibited the work in a large-scale retrospective until now, and his performance oeuvre has thus remained largely ignored by official histories of contemporary art (performance studies is another story, but even there his work has been somewhat marginalized).[31] As Jennifer Doyle, a supporter of Athey's work since the late 1990s, puts it, "[i]n some ways, he is one of the most important figures in the history of performance in this city [Los Angeles], as an artist whose work represents that which can't be accommodated by institutional discourse."[32] She goes on to note that, unlike some of his 1990s collaborators such as Cathy Opie, "Athey has never sought the protective umbrella of a commercial career," arguing that his work (involving "piercing, penetration, cutting, bleeding, and sexualized forms of display") is "too risky to be programmed."[33] In fact, however, it has been and continues to be widely programmed around the world.[34] It is simply *not exhibited by official large-scale visual art venues* (museums and galleries). Athey's work is less threatening to performance venues than to the structures of official art history and its institutions—here, the potential to contain and make sense of the work of art, and ultimately to commodify it, are central to how art discourse and institutions function.

How can we "exhibit" Athey's work without destroying its power as uncontainable and uncommodifiable? Is it impossible? Doyle concludes with the incisive suggestion that Athey's work at its most intense—as in *Incorruptible Flesh/Dissociative Sparkle*, involving the direct participation of audience members to soothe the artist as he lies naked and penetrated by a baseball bat, with his eyes pinned back such that he requires caretaking with eye drops (as directed or performed by gallery assistants)—cannot be displayed as such after it is over because "[t]he real 'show' in this performance is not Athey's body itself [nor, I would add, the remainders such as the props used or images taken], but the spectacularization of our communal relationship to it."[35] Indeed, precisely because of the violence of his self-exposure and rendering of himself vulnerable to us as audience members, Athey exacerbates the ontological potential of live art to activate the *relationality of all interpretation*, wherein we are called upon to engage in the circuits of meaning and value around the work (which does not exist as a "thing" outside of these circuits). This does not mean that the work is "authentic" because it is live performance (whatever that means). It simply points to Athey's capacity to render the live body specific in its coextensivity with emotions, thought, pleasures of the flesh, and selfhood—it is thus only by stroking his body or putting eye drops in his eyes in *Incorruptible Flesh/Dissociative Sparkle* that the performance takes place, as it highlights (in Doyle's words) the "ordinariness of touch," making haptic engagement a hallmark of the intimacy inherent to the work.[36]

How would we *exhibit* such a piece? Would an attempt to display its remains (props, images, video) betray its specificity in its capacity as a live performance work? (As Doyle puts it: "It's not art about queer life, but the art of queer life. Where, how, does one ar-

[30] José Esteban Muñoz, (1996) "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, "Queer Acts," special issue 8, no. 2: (pp. 5-11).

[31] Exceptions include most notably Dominic Johnson, whose edited volume Pleading in the Blood is a key inspiration for this project. As well, Jennifer Doyle and I have written about Athey's work for many years, but Doyle is not an art historian. Recently, younger scholars such as Karen Gonzalez Rice have addressed Athey's work; see Gonzalez Rice's chapter three, "The Faith Healings of Ron Athey," in Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 59-88. Before the Queer Communion: Ron Athey show, no exhibition of any scale has occurred of Athey's work in a gallery or museum context aside from small shows of particular props at venues such as Western Projects (Los Angeles, 2006) and Invisible Exports (New York, 2012).

[32] Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociated Sparkle," Cruising the Archive, ed. Frantz and Locks, (p 140).

[33] Ibid., (p. 143).

[34] Athey has toured his work consistently across the US and internationally, in the 2000s especially across the United Kingdom and in Europe. And his work is currently in high demand: as this catalogue went to press, a month-long UK tour of Athey's new piece Acephalous Monster is in the planning for October 2019; this piece debuted at Performance Space in New York in fall 2018, and is being performed again in conjunction with the Los Angeles version of Queer Communion: Ron Athey, at Redcat performance space in August 2021. In addition, Doyle herself produced a maverick expanded version (including collaborator Sean Griffin and his Opera Povera) of Gifts of the Spirit in the deconsecrated Cathedral of St. Vibiana in Los Angeles in early 2018, and Athey participated as well in a one-off unique collaborative performance event (with elements from Acephalous Monster and other earlier works, including a revised version of the "human printing press" from 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life), working with Cassils and Fanaa in Cyclic, which was sponsored by Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson, and took place in one of the "lung" structures of Biosphere 2, in Oracle, Arizona. See Ginger Shulick Porcella, Cyclic (Tucson: Museum of Contemporary Art, forthcoming), which includes my essay "Breathing New Life into the Biosphere 2 Lung," np.

[35] Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociated Sparkle," (p. 145).

[36] Ibid. Doyle was one of the assistants in the version of the piece at Artist's Space, New York, in 2006. I discuss the relational potential of queer performance, and Athey's work in this context, in my book In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance (New York: Routledge Press, 2021), see especially chapter three, "Relationality."

chive that?")[37] By attempting to display elements from Athey's career-long performative work, almost all elements drawn from his archive with which I have been living, I seek both to trouble what the art museum or gallery sets itself out to *do* and to provide some access to representative elements of Athey's work, as complex and impossible to summarize or contain as it is. The archival bits point to the limits of the gallery's tolerance for the detritus of the live (its drive to turn the live artist's body into a fetish or commodity—per the Museum of Modern Art's reifying 2011 exhibition of the work of Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*[38]). The range of materials chosen for *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, albeit in seriously redacted form since the spaces allotted are limited and performance materials have been damaged or lost, points to the vast array of themes, symbolic regimes, and emotional registers activated in Athey's work.

But of course the task of adequately "representing" Athey's career, his creative energy, or his queer life work, is impossible. One can only suggest. Muñoz understands the extent to which careers such as Athey's produce ephemeral bits and pieces as historical "evidence" of a complex queer life and creative projects that challenge the Euro-American knowledge building process—whereby "great men" produce large-scale singular objects that remain static through time, to be studied for the "truth" of a culture and its histories. Athey's practice, indeed, can be perfectly characterized per Muñoz's notion of *"Queer acts"* that "*contest and rewrite the protocols of critical writing*," and I would assert—as well (and even more so) the protocols of curatorial work and art historical interpretation. Hence my perhaps embarrassingly personal opening to this catalogue essay.

To this end, I take seriously Muñoz's proposal that—with creative life projects such as Athey's—we might better replace the idea of interpretation with the energy of "decipherment," a term he borrows from Caribbean novelist and critic Sylvia Wynter. He cites Wynter's text as follows: "Rather than seeking to 'rhetorically demystify,' a deciphering turn seeks to decipher what a process of rhetorical mystification does. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to mean but what they can be deciphered to do, it also seeks to evaluate the 'illocutionary force' and procedures with which they do what they do[38]." With the case of Athey and the complex ephemeral evidence of his career-long exploration of a range of performative, creative projects, we are definitely well-off to heed Wynter's idea of seeking to *decipher* the works, exploring the "'illocutionary force' and procedures with which they do what they do."[39]

Rendering a life work based on performance in more or less static physical form through exhibition is an extremely complex and challenging project. This complexity is arguably intensified with the queer archive of a queer person who produces queer BDSM performances—one finds, for example, blood-, sweat-, and mucus-encrusted costumes and props and (per the Judas Cradle) torture devices in various states of cleanliness and repair among the remnants of these works. These objects in their effects parallel the visceral emotional frisson produced by some of the handwritten texts in Athey's archive—some scrawled as early as his teenaged years, or during the period in his mid-to-late twenties when he was removed from the world while dealing with a vicious drug addiction. Some will (and should) remain private, but others that point to themes in key performances are reproduced here in this catalogue and some appear also in the exhibition. There is nothing as wrenching as reading a text labeled "Angry Pain," for example, which binds together spiritual ecstasy and pain with bodily pleasure and suffering, these

[37] Doyle, "Ron Athey's Dissociated Sparkle," (p. 145).

[38] This retrospective of the work of Marina Abramović, with the artist's full participation, turned her into a "dead" fetish at the center of the spectacularized atrium, lit by klieg lights. See my critique of this show, "The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," TDR: The Drama Review 55: 1 (Spring 2011), (pp 16-45).

[39] Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," (1992) 12, citing Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice," Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema, ed. Mbye Cham. Trenton, NJ: African World Press. (pp 266-67).

two coupled darkly with the searing emotion that tends to accompany both ("my soul torn and defacated [sic] on").

Because Athey deploys BDSM strategies of cutting, bleeding, binding, and piercing throughout his works, the ephemerality of his performance acts are all the more evident. As Amber Jamilla Musser argues in her lyrical study of the function of masochism in art, *Sensational Flesh*, masochism opens up the simultaneous internal/external effect (and affect) of sensation as related to power (after all, masochism is motivated by the desire to be dominated). She notes that an assumption that one's sensation would be shared by others produces sensation as "both individual and impersonal; it occupies a sphere of multiplicity without being tethered to identity."[40] Artists deploying BDSM, as Doyle also recognized in Athey's case, explicitly refuse the structures of authentication that function in art institutions to *pin down* the artist as *identified*. While we all may think we know that Ron Athey is a white gay male artist who is HIV positive, witnessing a performance will expose the limits of attaching these labels to a commodifiable quantity (to an art world "identity" that can be mobilized easily within the late capitalist circuits of the gallery and its related institutions). This unknowability exacerbates the complexity of people as humans (rather than author functions, as Michel Foucault would have put it): I have known Ron for years, have lived his archive, and yet I hardly know him at all.[41] In the end, bleeding on stage cannot be contained or marketed with the same ease as the acts and materials associated with a performance such as Marina Abramović's offering of herself (her body contained, unmoving, and contemplative) as an object in her 2011 retrospective *The Artist is Present*.

Part V: Ron Athey and Queer Community

I have admitted my partiality, my personal investment in Ron Athey's career, my over-proximity to his archive, my inability to distance myself from his torn and shattered yet epically alive forms of embodiment. All of these nonetheless could not deter me from this attempt to "do queerness" (borrowing a term of Muñoz's) through this attempt at mounting a retrospective of Athey's work.[42] Whether or not this will successfully honor the queerness of Athey's life and work remains to be seen.[43] The challenges are clear, and some of them are outlined above. At the very least I hope to do queerness at least enough to produce curiosity and perhaps awe in visitors, instilling a desire to study and understand and encounter more of Athey's work in relational ways that inspire them to accept the potential queerness in themselves.

Because, as noted, Athey's work specifically challenges our desire to make a singular subject of him (to *identify* him firmly), the best way forward seems to be to deploy a range of elements relating to past performances—the "ephemera as evidence" of which Muñoz writes so eloquently—and to place them in relation to the queer communities Athey has, since his teens, been a part of. This strategy maintains the double advantage of avoiding the pretense that we could ever fully document, exhibit, or understand his complex and relational performances and of providing a model for how to understand queer histories (in this case *through* the work of Athey).

Accordingly, the exhibition is divided into sections reflecting the communities Athey has helped form, circulated within, productively skirted, or otherwise

[40] Amber Musser, (2014) Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism (New York: NYU Press), (p 2).

[41] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" (1969), tr. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), (pp 124-127).

[42] Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," (p. 12).

[43] As noted above, now that the exhibition has taken place in New York and Los Angeles, the reviews suggest that at least some of what I had hoped to achieve has been successful.

engaged throughout his career. They are arranged in a roughly chronological fashion indicating the order within his life in which he began to participate in or to help form the community. But the chronology is not neat and teleological; it is, rather, recursive and overlapping, mirroring the queer time of Athey's complex, multifaceted life work. If anything, the queer time of Athey's work points to what Carla Freccero has called "intergenerational quasi-relationality":[44] by the early 1990s, when he moved out of the punk and club scenes and lifted himself beyond addiction and AA frameworks, Athey's work directly brings people together, or cements communities; he acts with increasing confidence as solo artist, collaborator, creative director, producer, boss, mentor, inspiration, colleague, and/or friend or lover from this time. These bonds are actual—and they are relational and intergenerational; they mark Athey's increasingly wide circuits of friendships and fierce erotic and/or platonic love connections, but are also sometimes attenuated or sundered. They tie together creative people from a vast range of backgrounds primarily in the United States, Canada, and Europe (but also Mexico and beyond).

Producing performances that enact communal imaginings of aesthetically yearning queer lives, Athey works within and across generations of queer creatives to make life worth living for his compatriots at the subcultural margins of Euro-American culture. In this way, Athey activates the power of filiation that saves those who remain unembraced by (or violently reject) the heteronormative structures of nuclear family that dominate the Euro-American concept of self as belonging. As we saw Sedgwick described this situation, queer is less about "identity" and more about alignments through "performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation."[45] Filiation has the capacity to save us from isolation, even as we wend our way toward our inevitable ends (which are potentially so much closer for those diagnosed as HIV+ in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Athey). Existing relationally, those in this network of beloved Athey comrades refuse the radical isolation that an intolerant society forces upon the queer.[46]

It was this consideration of the potential of Athey's work to constitute networks of queer allies that guided the selection of authors in this catalogue. As coeditors, Andy Campbell and I, in fact, represent two different generations of historians/theorists committed to queer (and feminist) community, and we extended a concern to encompass authors from diverse generations, geographies, disciplinary points of view, family or cultural backgrounds, and manifested sex/gender identifications to select our choice of contributors. Nearly every thinker, friend, co-performer, artist, curator, historian to whom we sent an invitation replied with eagerness, exemplifying (as Andy put it to me) the intimate bonds Athey has cultivated throughout his life. We have had to leave out hundreds more, and can only thank them here for direct or indirect conversations around their appreciation for Athey's work and friendship.

Part VI: Queer Communion and Beyond

Complementing the physical/phenomenological, emotional, and psychological experience of the show is a timeline, including key turning points in Athey's life and career as well as contextualizing local, global, and national milestones. And live events at each venue include, variously, new works by Athey, panels, papers, and

[44] Carle Freccero in Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, (2007) "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," GLQ 13, n. 2-3, (p. 187).

[45] Sedgwick, Tendencies, (p. 9).

[46] Freccero is poignant here as well: "teleology is so crucial to our imaginings of time: we're born and then at the end, yup, we die./ When I desire … I struggle against the brutal hegemony of the visual's conceptualization of the body—overwhelmingly, in this culture anyway, structured by linear time—for what might otherwise be a far queerer experience of the body's persistence in time," in Freccero et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," (p 193).

works by artists inspired and/or mentored by Athey. A maverick cultural figure, performance artist, performance programming impresario, writer, polymath, and all around “Renaissance man” of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, Athey bears a capacity to touch people—through his solo works as well as his charisma as a friend, inspiration, and sage—which is mapped across and through the objects, sounds, moving images, and (I can only hope) the care through which this exhibition and its related events have been conceptualized and organized. In this way, I hope *Queer Communion* as an event spins off its own “documentation,” and affects bodies and minds even as Athey and his work have done—if, inevitably, never quite as fiercely. This project is intended to be a homage to a creative force, a human who has transformed the lives of many people, including myself.

Curatorial Strategies *in* Progress

Anastasia Proshutinskaya

I am an independent dance curator based in Moscow. I was asked to write about my curatorial strategies and that **task** really puzzled me. What are those strategies? I used to curate dance at the public institution, a cultural centre. Now, I am a freelancer, mainly working with contemporary art museums. Is it about changing the strategies? Do I have any strategy, or do I merely survive as a professional for as long as I can? Completely lost and frustrated, I decided to talk to a couple of people – the trick which always had worked for me. Actually, that's not a trick, that's my epistemological strategy. Once there is a dialogue, once there is a clear request from someone – things start to clear up. So, this text now consists of two quite unrelated parts, of my two unexpected challenges. And it goes like this.

part one

I had asked one dance artist, what would she like to read in an article written by a curator. I told her: "Unlike critics or researchers, curators who are busy with programming venues or large scale festivals rarely write essays that would reveal their line of thinking and their own insights. However, they all see lots of performances, they talk a lot with wide variety of artists, they discuss current situation with colleagues, they research and they travel, they know how things work economically and politically here and there… They make those practical decisions for the current projects; however, their expertise, their passion, their visions are usually much wider than that, and remain largely unexpressed. Now, imagine you can ask any curator any question. I mean, you can ask one of those legendary curators from that festival or that venue, or some radically innovative curator… So, what would you particularly like to read in that article?" And she said: "I would like curator to confirm that as an artist I am free to do anything".

To me, the question here certainly goes beyond naïve denial of frames and discourses, or mere tiredness of them. Because then, one shall be really tired of curators and their confirmations as well. Most often curators frame things, they make choices and tie them with ideas of some acknowledged value from philosophy, sociology, ecology, etc. So, the question here, I guess, is how can we develop a whole other discourse of non-discursiveness. In which ways can the strategy avoid the acknowledged agendas, avoid subscriptions, and still be a strategy that is responsible and political? Can one make art politically, in context, and yet constantly multiply, blur and relativate all the references and messages? This sounds like a contradiction in terms.

However, what if we take *imagination* for a key term? Yes, imagination had already been capitalized by neoliberalism, as an ability to see creative solutions in a situations of uncertainty. That inventive *creativity* constantly deals with in-coming information from the complex reality, and it is valued according its problem-solving potential. It is a production of the new, but not any new; it shall produce the new which would be considered an improvement. So, I rather specify imagination as *fantasia*. It may run on partial information or without any, but it has deep connection to matter. This kind of inapplicable imagination is today largely derelict by / **because of** capitalistic media, political propaganda and by the urge to consolidate in opposition to it all. We are forced to constantly deal with information and relate our actions to it. Simultaneously, the connection with materiality is thinning. Then, what if we frame imagination as a conscious strategy of resistance to dematerialization?

It is often discussed how art can improve the world, develop solutions, bring closer the awaited new, etc. Artists are supposed to figure out/imagine how shall we live together, live digitally, live ecologically, etc. Here I am trying to emphasize how art and imagination also maintain, preserve and secure something that is very old. Psychologists say that imagination is essential to human psyche. They explain, it connects individual existence to material environment of reality. They observe that critical thinking generally competes with creative thinking. They know that the urge to find a solution, the heightened significance of the task, is inhibiting imagination. The fear to be seen as stupid, to be rejected, often results in conformity, and that is where the "copying mind" starts working, not the one that imagines. It's a sort of common place knowledge, at least from 1970s. It is basic for art practices with kids and amateurs. Contemporary artists seem to operate on completely different, superhuman terms: they are always on urgent mission.

I question it here, and it is a mere suggestion. As a dance curator, often working with new productions and artistic residencies, I simply don't feel like charging artists with missions. I don't want to be on a mission either. But I feel quite an enthusiasm in coping with language and finding ways to appreciate materiality of dance, to analyze materiality of imagination. If it is not a mission, if "it is not a big deal" - one may take and drop, one may play and fail, for real. Probably, in some sense I could compare it to the work of fashion designers. From collection to collection they continue something that is their distinct style, and on top of that they constantly draw something new in while dropping **some of their previous finds**. They are sort of saying: "People! This season I propose you this kind of mood". That mood was somehow in the air already, but now it is a shape, a colour, a texture, a detail. I mean, it is all very concrete, few interpretations. And we all know it is just a suggestion, we know that clothes is not the central meaning of life – and that releases certain freedom. I don't want to romanticise fashion market, any market; I just wonder how in dance we would discuss certain movements or compositional structures in a same manner.

Well, all those speculations are to respond to that simple request in the beginning... Would that artist be happy with this line of thinking? Would it sound like a confirmation for her? In any case she helped me to clarify something for myself, something about my current curatorial strategies. Sometimes we really need somebody to ask us a question – so that we can start formulating. **One of my projects created that particular situation**: I had asked over 20 dance artists about their artistic statements. **This simple request wouldn't probably have created the same effect** in Europe, where artists often have professional websites or have their statements ready to paste into another grant application. But in Moscow-centred dance community artists of earlier and more recent generations were never asked for things like that, and for them that was a true challenge. The texts they all wrote were bound together in a document that became a point of many further references. But the cathartic part of it were two long nights at the black box theatre, full house, where those artists were delivering their statements from the stage. Simple set, no dancing. The project title appeared by itself - "the community congress". It exceeded the personal practice of formulating and posed a more general question: what makes all of those artists an informally recognised community, do they share at least something in their visions of dance? Once you formulate your idea sharp enough, there is a chance you will fall out of the consensus. It takes some practice. Since then, I love to give this task when teaching courses on curating dance art.

Of course, I had to go through it as well, make an effort and formulate my own curatorial statement. As if there is no consensus. As if there is no big deal. As if I can step aside from my substantial practice of curatorial intellectual framing along with constant creative problem solving. As if I can. So, I will add it here to follow up this part:

> "My medium is a situation, situation for dance. It might take form of a festival, of a showing, of a residency, or, say, an interview. As a curator, I connect – people and people, aesthetic and life experiences. That's why, I guess, most of my projects are somewhat international; that's why they always have some references to both, dramaturgy/psychology and art history. When working around a certain theme, it is interesting to deal with paradoxes and dilemmas: for example, the strength of the weakness, the past being present, the freedom of the restraints, etc. On a mental level it is a flat contradiction, but when it comes to live and material practice, dance has a unique recourse to invent voluminous solutions of high inner complexity and unsettled dynamics. Currently, I tend to follow artists who in themselves and in their works connect fairly diverse but equally passionate practices. A sort of utopian vision of interconnectedness of everything, but on a level of concrete people. My version of avoiding generalization and of seeing artists and audience members as distinctively diverse - is in relation to assumed differences in numerous known types of perception, reaction, imaginative thinking, etc. I take every piece of dance for a sort of ontological suggestion from an artist, a suggestion to the audience "to be" in a certain way. And so, as a curator, I would like to contribute to suggestions of freedom. If necessary, I would assign freedom of conscience and of imagination to be my curatorial agenda".

part two

I had proposed the same question to a colleague, dance art curator working in Moscow. I had asked her: "What would you particularly like to read in an article written by curator? Something about new methodologies and ethics, or something about current formats and the influences of pandemic? Something about curators' favourite projects or their epic failure projects?" And she said: "My main question is *chto delat'*? (what is to be done? *rus*) here in Moscow, in these current political and economical circumstances".

Can anybody write an article about curating dance in Moscow specifically? Would anybody outside of Moscow be interested to read that article? These are the questions of locality. It is getting more and more clear that institutions are not some abstract achievements, but rather they are products of multiple local circumstances. Although circumstances are here, at hand, it is difficult sometimes to see them fully or to see them optimistically. For now, in Moscow there is no MFA-level program, no venue, no grant support that would be solely dedicated to new dance. Official culture understands contemporary dance as new ballet or jazz influenced commercial dance; it gets more conservative and regulative. Freelancers and project-based groups are not considered reliable cultural workers. Stages belong to repertoire theatres. The estate is expensive, even commercial performing arts ven-

ues don't survive. It is indeed a puzzle: where shall one start here and what actions would make any sense in a year or two. However, *chto delat'* is not only about being overwhelmed, also and mainly it expresses a need for some utopia, some imaginable and acceptable future, that would direct and energise diverse efforts of art practitioners.

This question is timely. One may observe how the previous utopia that was shared by freelance dance artists had gradually lost its effect. The COVID-19 quarantine and the lack of international travels had only catalysed this process. I would argue that starting from early 1990s that previous utopia for non-classical and non-institutional dance was internationalism, i.e. integration into Western professional networks. Today it may be critically framed as artists' self-colonial practice, but I don't see and won't describe it that way. I see it as a utopia, anticipation of soon being together and recognised by each other – a sentiment strong enough to inspire artists to create things! Konstantin Chelkaev, choreographer in his early 30s, had covered "The Internationale" anthem in one of his dance performances in 2017. That particular generation of young choreographers had gathered around cultural centre ZIL in 2012-2018, many of them had no formal choreographic education, often they held degrees in cultural studies, history, journalism and visual arts. Curating dance there, I remember that **rise / upturn** of lectures on theory and philosophy, reading groups for dance artists, and enthusiastic text translations. That was all Western knowledge, yes, but I still see it as an effort to join the conversation. I still gravitate towards "Cosmopolitan Vision" by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2006) [1]. With this motivation I had curated a "historical" showcase, presenting those artists to a group of invited curators from Impulstanz and Tanz im August festivals, from MDT (Stockholm) and Zodiak (Helsinki), from Kanuti SAAL (Tallinn) and Les Urbaines team (Switzerland), among others. The project was called "What if they went to Moscow" as a direct address to curators on one hand; on the other, and in relation to artists that was reference to Chekhov's "Three Sisters" and that hesitation to make a decisive move. I am still so thankful that my colleagues joined that situation of mutual encounter; I barely could name it a showcase at the end.

Now, the mood had changed. Just before the pandemic, I took part in a conference on a *provincial contemporary dance* in Russia, held in a small city of Kaluga. I anxiously anticipated confronting with "*compensatory autochthonous ideology*", as Bulgarian researcher Alexandar Kiosev comprehensively puts it[2]. But again, artists found ways not to get into those traps. In her report, Daria Plokhova contemplated Western origin of postmodern dance that she practices. And she spoke of its exoticism. Detached from its sociocultural environment, its inner logic and routines, the form of Western postmodern dance in Russia either mesmerises or leaves in bewilderment. For its enthusiastic practitioners, she concludes, this dance is always the event of otherness, and that might be a reason why it is still so hard to make sense of local environment through that dance, i.e. being politically engaged artists. Currently, she and her colleague Alexandra Portyannikova work on a project related to Russian avant-garde movement theories[3].

So, what is the new utopia then? To invent some particularly Russian contemporary dance? No, I actually don't see it; however, the turn is definitely related to locality. I would suppose, this new utopia anticipates local recognition and support. Not the support from official structures – the energy and hopes are not directed that way. In fact the current pressing situation and the overall feeling of

[1] Ulrich Beck. (2006) The Cosmopolitan Vision. Polity Press

[2] Alexandar Kiosev, http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html (accessed November, 2021)

[3] https://www.isadorino-gore.com/productionsen (accessed November, 2021)

“dead-endness” today creates a very specific new tension: people in big cities are not happy with inability to influence anything. They work, they earn, but they cannot act on a level larger than their private needs. The non-mainstream contemporary culture gradually becomes that space of possible influencing, of visible contribution. This trend had started within visual arts field in Moscow and now reaches dance. To support dance may become a form of civic engagement that is still legal and feels like counterculture. For the artists and curators that would mean a new challenge – learning to see and trust the local audience as their main foundation. There are decades of mistrust and the lack of common language, but it still feels worth trying.

Notes:
1. Ulrich Beck. (2006) The Cosmopolitan Vision. Polity Press
2. Alexandar Kiosev, http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html (accessed November, 2021)
3. https://www.isadorino-gore.com/productionsen (accessed November, 2021)

Co-curating (Programmes and Festivals)

Jasmina Založnik

> The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library.
>
> Michel Foucault[1]

The phenomena of co-curated programmes and festivals I understand as an intersection of a search and different becoming, as a set of questions with an undefined number of answers, a patchwork that is continuously changing, a breeze that helps you breathing, a cloud that moves and changes shapes, a space that can turn into a place, a loose tie that holds you but does not repress you, an open space which points toward possibilities, a gesture that welcomes, a thought that provokes, a move that creates and embodies a difference etc. An ideal festival is a site where it is unavoidable to grasp the variations of the world view-where perspective and acknowledgement discourse as a set of practice and a set of practice is a discourse which already shapes the object of that discourse/practice. Such a site is fun to make in company, not in solitude, as only in company a certain joy can be filtered in, in company gentleness, contrast and variations become more present, the fine-tuning of thoughts more visible etc. These views and beliefs keep me busy and present in co-curation of festival(s) and co-curated programmes.

Contemporary dance, as marginalized and fringe field that lacks the political support since its beginnings in the context of Balkan and East European region, where I am situated, cannot serve as a space in which one could gain either great financial or/and social benefits, either the power by which one would influence the masses. The position of curator in this field remains on the level of worker (cultural worker) – as many of my colleagues consciously state in their biographies. Identifying as a worker in the field of art, allows us to pinpoint at least two things: first, that not all art belongs to the upper classes or those that aspire to enter their circles, and second, that artistic fields (at least to a certain degree) can function as activist fields. I am putting the accent on activism which I understand as practice that consists of efforts to promote, impede, direct, or intervene in the social, political, economic etc. Which reforms with the desire to create a shift and changes of *the order of things* (M. Foucault). Strongly believing in the limitations of one's-own cognitive apparatus and acknowledging the fertility of dialogue as a means of a spontaneous, evolving form, mutual enrichment and learning that leads to personal and collective growth extending beyond language and representation[2]. It makes the most sense for me to work in a collective.

It is true that (artistic) collectives had a certain outrageous presence in the history of former Yugoslavia, which with its fertility no doubt shaped me through my observations of the strengths that were gained in collective artistic actions and shifts in art-mapping that were maintained by the collective efforts. For me a very strong and potent reference remains the 1980s, when art collectives started unconditionally and directly negating the established representational system, especially its unquestionable and unproblematic norms. As the process of masking and masquerade was the primary engine of the hypocrisy of the regime, artists started to play with them through the tactic of *dramatization*, outlining the most suppressed and uncanny issues. In addition, they mimicked the socialist system through employment of their anonymity (Dječaci, Autopsia, Laibach, NSK etc.), which on one

[1] Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library«. In: Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard [translated by Donald F. Bouchard], Ithaca, New York: Cornel University Press, 1980, p. 91.

[2] see Nina Power's lecture at the Forming Futures Symposium, May 1, 2021 (streaming through the Vimeo platform), available at https://vimeo.com/543944074, retrieved 20. 5. 2021 for more information on the importance of live communication and the negative impact of technology on the individual and therefore the collective body.

hand made them even more mysterious and on the other additionally frightening for the state representatives as they couldn't easily unearth the collectives' intentions.

A witty example of the period is the multimedia, post-performance group The Boys (Dečaci, 1979 – 1981, Belgrade/Serbia), initiated by media activist and artist Dragan Papić as a false representation of the power techniques in the forming of ideal citizens. The Boys project started with assuming a fake identity – Papić published portrait photographs of three anonymous young men[3] with dandy short haircuts, dressed in seemingly expensive suits in the Belgrade youth periodicals *Vidici* and *Student* without any additional text.[4] Readers responded to such an act with wonder and a desire to receive some additional information, especially as they could not be sure if the trio were young unknown politicians or if they represented something else.

The same photo appeared in the next issue under the title *Boys* and was later extended with a slogan on the 8th of March: 'The Boys emancipate women.'[5] Papić painted their names as graffiti in the streets of Belgrade, in various 'rebus-like' derivations, such as '*Kde su dečaci?*' [Where are the boys?]. Hence, Papić created a link managing to depict an 'interpretation of actual or constructed social events or incidents through the gradual unfolding of the ongoing performance with its various performative gestures'[6] of the fictional group, and aroused further wonder in readers-spectators. In 1980, a single was launched with two tracks by The Boys. The lyrics of the second song[7] hint at gay sexuality, and masqueraded as this 'undesired' sexual identity, which was at the time still criminalized in Serbia. However, the meaning and aim of the project was only came to light a year later in the *Dictionary of Technology* (1981)[9] – a special issue of *Vidici* Journal that could be labelled at the same time as an artwork, a radical performative gesture, an intervention in the public sphere and a manual for progressive artists and intellectuals of this upcoming decade and written with philosophical precision and politically incorrect humour – in it was explained:

> Boys (Dečaci). From Indo-European root *Dhei*, to suck. m. The essence of idols. i. Objectivization of history is necessarily without character: all for the collective, nothing for the individual. Within the institution there is no more self-hood, there are only technologies, or, *if you like it*, The Boys. That is the secret behind the project The Boys that *Vidici* has carried out in 1980 [...]. Technology was perceived as the production of The Boys. Vidici has demonstrated, through the possibility of concretely reified technology, the images that exist only in the medium and as a medium and through which all the technologies could see what they were: phantoms without reality. The Boys do not exist, yet they constantly move inside technology. They have their occupation and their fears of life outside the institution. They are the very essence of history. They should be shattered because they are the idols of life. Their end will be the beginning: Seth already rides. s. technologist, technology of life, phantoms. e. g. The Boys are a perfect form: handsome and smart – human. Behind them stands nothingness of technology.[9]

Even though soon after, the artistic intentions of the project were dismissed and The Boys transformed into the commercially oriented music group Idols (Idoli in original), when looking back at the project's development, The Boys could be recognized as a process of staging and directing technology, mimicking

[3] Represented by Srdjan Šaper, Vlada Divljan and Nebojša Krstić.

[4] Photography with explanatory text: Dečaci emancipuju žene [Boys emancipate women], Student, Mart 12, 1980, cover; Photo performance Škerovič and Dečaci, Vidici 27, no. 3 (1980): unnumbered, 'Dečaci u duhovnom okružju Vidika', Vidici 27, no 4 (1980): 19.

[5] See Student, March 12, 1980, cover.

[6] Ninoslava Vićentić, 716 Dečaci, 717 Dečaci, 718 334. 'Opšte odlike umetnosti i uloga medija: iznošenje društveno- angažovanog stava beogradskog Novog talasa', [Common Qualities of Art and the Role of the Media: Presenting Socially Engaged View of Belgrade New Wave] Kultura, no. 133 (2011): 334.

[7] Dečaci, Retko te vidjam sa devojkama [I Rarely See You with Girls], 2nd track on Pomoć, Pomoč [Help, Help], Izgled, May 1980, 7'' Vinyl Single.

[8] 'Rečnik tehnologije', edited by unsigned author, Vidici 28, no. 1-2, special issue (1981).

Leviathan in order to subvert him. By placing three young male figures on *the operating table* (Foucault), Papić gave them an image that was linked with political figures, while their artificiality in socialism was a concrete example of mirroring the *order of things*. The Boys amplified the fake order within society with a tactic of overidentification based on techniques of deconstruction taken from the Communist/socialist state apparatus, achieving subversion– of socrealism (as enforced and lived ideology) through socrealism (as aesthetics) via media manipulation; a tactic that was even more thoroughly realized later by the NSK[10].

However much the context has drastically changed in the last forty years, The Boys' techniques, there aims and their placement within technology still seem to be a relevant position when discussing progressive curatorial procedures (playing and using 'technology' as a main force through which the world is observed and understood). In addition, the formula of certain anonymity or invisibility of the group members can still be seen as potent, as such a position surpasses the individualism that has found its extreme and most brutal face in strongly mediated *selfie-based* culture. Visibility, (self)-presentation and labelling are aspects of a commerce that is working in the direction of out-casting primarily curators, theorists and artists working and living in the West and are thus (re)creating the existing boundaries between cultures and figures around Europe and the globe. While the art market is capable of grasping the artistic collective, it seems that such manifestations are not applicable for those in power of institutions (artistic directors and chief curators are mainly presented as individual figures). Therefore, it is not a surprise that still today, curatorial collectives are rare in the West. In addition, as marginalized phenomena these groups mostly consist of female or non-binary personalities, no matter if the collective appears with or without a brand-name. Furthermore, the founding of a collective programme is usually related to political reasons and could be understood as a step and decision made out of necessity.

In every collective work one (easily) loses her/his/their voice as an independent entity. Views overlap into a polyphony, which in turn leads to a certain degree of anonymity. However, the interruption of the monologue form of individualism is possible only through polyphony. Polyphony does not in any way mean embracing a totality, but at the same time it points to possible new perspectives that enable the breaking of unshakable (individualized and appropriated) positions and opens up the possibility of astonishing experiences. Only through such a united coexisting voice can a multiplicity of positions, discourses, visions, understandings, etc. unravel, even when such a multiplicity is not entirely visible. It can appear as a tiny crack or simply as a more obvious difference that broadens visions and questions clear positioning. It can appear as an unbalanced moment, as a cold shower that can shiver or awake you.

Co-curating is just one of many forms of collective-work or co-labouring that emerge out of dialogue, intense discussions and negotiation processes. Moving away from the centralization of power, which is often used in discussions about programme directors and curators, as stated already, I understand collaboration as a form of co-operation and co-labouring. Such practices happen in shared time-space and due to their nature remain open at least to some extent to the unexpected, unthought, unpredictable, tangible etc.

In the context where it is not possible to strive for a position of curatorial stardom, the process of creation is a challenge in which co-curators can reflect together, learn about their differences, listen to others in order to grasp their con-

[9] 'Dečaci', Vidici 28, no. 1-2 special issue (1981): 5

[10] NSK or Neue Slowenische Kunst is the name of controversial art collective in Slovenia that was established in 1984 by the multimedia group Laibach (established in 1980), the theatre group Scipion Nasice Sister Theatre (SNST) (198 –1987) (later represented by Red Pilot and Noordung) and the visual art group IRWIN. Together they established a fourth group, the design department New Collectivism and later a few other subdivisions: the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy, Retrovision, Film, and Builders. NSK built its artistic concept on the "retro" method, for which each of the three founding groups coined its own name: Laibach called it the "retro-avant-garde", the SNST the "retrogarde", and IRWIN the "retro principle". After the breakup of Yugoslavia and the establishment of an independent Slovenia, the NSK groups invested their common ideas in founding the NSK State in Time in 1992, which is today represented by IRWIN.

trasts/divergence, learn to voice and argue their individual position(s), sharpen their thoughts while practicing how to gently and productively respond to others, and enhance their artistic as well as ethical positions. With the help of others, the individuals practice connectedness between already existing frames or dots and elaborate a way of filling up the existing gaps that are needed for the festival precision.

The processes in co-curation are long and exhausting and most of the time it is impossible to maintain a control over the process; the usual rhythms of thinking and seeing things are constantly interrupted by the rhythms of co-creators (collaborators), their views and understandings. In such a process, a constant tension accompanies the labour that is shared: the tension of different understandings of the process, its individual phases, the contacts between units, and the understanding of the holistic structure and its specific tendencies. But at the same time, the fact of not-being-able-to-control should be approached as a challenge to be faced in a productive way, since giving up or arriving at the point of not-wanting-to control could easily produce boredom as well. If tensions are recognized as productive and co-curatorial processes are acknowledged as places where one learns the most, obstacles and tensions can be envisioned as unavoidable parts of mutual growth.

In order to start working as a collective body, as a team of co-curators, there must be a certain common vision that drives the collective toward their mutual aim. In addition, if such relations are to last it is essential to base the relations on trust, respect and the members' dignities. Only in such conditions, could one unselfishly share all their four bodies (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) and dare risking and even failing while thinking, feeling and moving along with others. In such conditions, members do not only pass their knowledge, tools, contacts etc. to the others, but rather meet and confront the coexisting differences; and through collective processes enrich their knowledge, their views, visions and positions, or ideally transform these knowledge, views, visions and positions into something new. The transformative ideal is what actually belongs to the co-curatorial team as the third body, and can be seen as an entity that encompasses every member of the group. If this really happens due to its mutual presence the collective responsibility becomes unquestionable. It cannot be shifted or displaced on the shoulders of others.

However, the collective body is not necessarily a fixed entity, but flexible and in constant flux. Its consistency is conditioned by established protocols that could be set as a foundation of the collective. Based on my observations and experience, larger collectives are more flexible than smaller ones. On one hand, a collective body made of three individuals will most likely cease to exist if one of the members decided to redraw. While on the other hand, a collective body consisting of six or more members has greater chances to remain alive as a collective without one member or with a replacement of a founding member. The reasons for the collectives' restructuring can be of a wide range of (personal) reasons: including expectations, interpersonal frictions and tensions, new obligations or changes in career or life paths, lack of funds, exhaustion, etc.

In opposition to established festivals that have a highly symbolic role due to their long-history and are expected to preserve a certain idea of culture, a newly founded festival is usually expected to introduce something 'new' - something that has not found a proper place in the local environment. Such expectations can be

taken either as a pressure or a challenge to those deciding to embark on the adventure of establishing the festival. Additionally, they can block or push the creative energies behind it. In which direction the creativity of the beginning will move depends also on the funding bodies behind the newly established site. I would dare to claim that the more precarious conditions there are, the wilder the imagination and invention can go, as the funding structures behind the festival in most cases will try to have a stronger impact on the festival programme. For example, a local funding administration usually expects the support of local artists and would wish to show off with representative international works, while the European commission expects to follow the programme lines and within them include respected artists of supported international projects. This means that networks and supporting entities will in most cases function as tied trade, in which partners compete for visibility and wide-spread dissemination of their selected and supported artists or/and their artworks. Such a situation, can easily push the programme director(s) to the role of selectors instead of curators and bring their respected programmes closer to an incoherent display of shows.

How to connect and balance the two extremes and visions through curatorial practice; the playful ground in which one creates, tests and questions the usual formats and frames on one hand, and the noncoherent selection of expected and sellable artworks on the other? The answer could be found in an observation of curator, dramaturg and writer Florian Malzacher, former artistic director of Impulse Theater Festival (2013–2017 in Cologne, Dusseldorf and Mulheim/Ruhr) and co-programmer of the multidisciplinary art festival steierischer herbst (2006–2012, Graz): “Contexts can offer artworks a proper reception – but they can also incapacitate them.”[11] Malzacher outlines the importance of the context; framing and situating the work in a wider programme through precision in outlining the vision, perspective and position, no matter that the artwork/programmes themselves can incapacitate a different reception/perception. No matter what the festival’s intention is, it always responds to its own context, therefore it is more potent if festivals find their own voice that can trigger something in their time-space, even if its audibility has a limited range.

When, and if, festivals have curatorial intention, their situated position has to be precisely outlined and framed in a way to stimulate a debate that can push artists and its audience toward new lines of thought, maybe even to empower them to shift, change or resolve in a different manner their research-processes, procedures or working frame(s). Working in the dance field and emphasizing the body as its central point, it should be added that it seems important not only to stimulate debate but also to create sites for experience; as it is exactly the embodied experience that can shift perception, position and understanding of one’s being in the world. Just as not all tools can function as political weapons, neither can all tactics or methods be infectious and effective enough to drill a hole in the existing system and shake it; the festival as a site could function also as a ground for experiments with tools, methods, tactics in choreographic and movement-based practices.

The most important thing is that co-curators as your collaborators play an inspirational role on others. Having mutual support helps one to keep their motivation for continuation of the project/festival programming. The belief as well as trust and playfulness are infectious. And in the collective one always finds someone that brings joy in the team, opens the doors toward imaginative landscapes of creation and curation, to a dreamy mode where impossible becomes possible; which is of

[11] Florian Malzacher "Cause & Result: About a Job with an Unclear Profile, Aim and Future" Frakcija 55, Curating Performing Arts (2010).

great importance at least at the beginning of the process when the curatorial frame and line is not yet settled. In the eroded context, sunken in frustrations, with the support of the collective it is easier to navigate, keep healthy ambitions and remain positive about possible changes and healthy growth of curatorial programmes, even if only by hacking the system.

FESTIVAL AS A LANDSCAPE

Festivals, similar to exhibitions, but also some other forms of art curating, should be acknowledged as unstable sites. The included content in its site cannot be anything else apart from a limitation with gaps to be consciously integrated if not even openly spoken about. In this way festivals (but also exhibitions and other curatorial programmes) can only be defined as uncontainable and uncontained. However, as in the curated exhibition, curated festivals should hold a certain glue that holds together its various chapters and makes it possible for the audience to walk through it in a similar way one walks through a landscape, where not everything is necessarily visible, graspable nor obvious. As in the landscape, dance and other forms of performing arts always reference our phenomenological experience of lived space, including its psychological and physiological dimensions, its various tempos and rhythms, our diverse and complex sensorial experiences and the relations toward our surroundings, the potency of the moment and importance of the moment. As not everything can be calculated and thought of in advance, the experience of watching, attending or simply just being in the presence of or within a festival can offer many unexpected surprises, shifts and turns which may happen in the least expected moments of the programme or around it. In that regard, making, watching or being with dance and other forms of ephemeral art can be understood as a political act. More precisely, in a similar way and based on what was already written about festivals and other co-curated programmes can be thought and understood with Chantal Mouffe's notion of the "political", which she describes as an aspect of life that cannot be separated from divergence and dissent, as the antithesis of consensus and the normativity.

In addition, if such a thesis can be applied to ephemeral art in general, it is even more reliable for co-curated programmes that emerge from the polyphony of voices. Intense research that is discussed among colleagues, and filtered through various positions that can be layered one upon another in various ways, should arrive and voice out the coexistence of practices and presences that disturb existing power relations, even if that is not highly visibly or obvious through the presented programme. I am convinced that processes of collaboration as described above leave a certain blueprint in their programmes, which can only be tracked down when looking closely at the programme and its various lines, including festival catalogues, discursive programmes, educational frames, selection of artists, production and coproduction, programmes' composition etc. In other words, a multitude is always present through the polyphony that emerges in the collective (co-curatorial) processes. If not seen and recognizable at first site, differences might unfold through experiencing the festival.

Even when the programmes are not communicated properly and even if they cannot be communicated entirely in their totality, the traces of creative pro-

cesses behind the curation can never be entirely dismissed. There is always space from which it is possible to pinpoint curators' limitations, their unrealized desires, their potential blind spots, the uncertain lines that are left in the programme or gaps that are waiting to be filled.

When co-curators intend to create a festival as a political site, they have to take into consideration a number of aspects by which twists and turns can be generated by and for the public. Knowing that the co-curator's visions cannot be anything like an ideal, due to the number of elements they have to take into a consideration (availability of art-works and/or artists, financial aspects and conditions in which the festival is, technical aspects of performances and availability of existing venues etc.), the team should try to integrate the projected ideal in their responsiveness and in their interaction. In addition, I imagine that most provocative and outrageously co-curated programmes have to remain in their half-realized potentiality, as a space without prejudice, a shadowed space as a condition to make the absence of light and clarity visible, a space that is opened for things that are not yet there and those that might be coming.

Curate in Context, Curating Contexts - *An* Essay on My Thoughts in Progress

Rok Vevar

8

This text was originally published in the Spring of 2021 on the website of Tanzquartier in Vienna under the title “Reality Check in Ljubljana, Slovenia Winter/Spring 2021” and it’s written as a hybrid of historicization, a short story and an essay that fuses a past period with the present political situation in Republic of Slovenia. It is a contextual meditation and essayistic tie on an exhibition “Autography, Uncanniness, Rebellion: the Photography of Božidar Dolenc” which I co-curated and was open between the 23rd of February and the 6th June 2021 in the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova. Rather than theorizing about curating practices and their relation to the context, I try to organize a narration that includes both and align them with a concrete curatorial example. In connection to the praxis as a form of doing, the text is – I suppose – a contextual curatorial practice itself. It’s framed by a spectator who is partially real partially fictional and is an example of how the political and artistic movements with their potential social transformations may work on the micro level of a personal self-narrative: text. No matter how precise different (historic, artistic, cultural) narratives or personal self-narratives are, without them there is nothing to confirm, nothing to oppose or nothing to be confronted with. Without them we tend to be confronted only with the spectral memories that come in the evening and sit by our side. In the cultural and artistic context of what used to be once Yugoslavia, we’re full of ghosts that call for their histories: texts and their contexts.

On Wednesday morning, the 24th of February 2021, a woman entered the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana and the young employee at the box office kindly reminded her to disinfect her hands in order to comply with the sanitary measures. She proceeded to do so and then asked whether the exhibition **Autography, Uncanniness, Rebellion: the Photography of Božidar Dolenc** was already open to the public.[1] “I’m very sorry, we usually host an evening ceremony on the day of the exhibition opening, but due to the pandemic we had to cancel the event today. So, from tomorrow morning on the exhibition will be open to the public until June. You’re most welcome to come and see it”, the young employee at the box office explained with a sense of guilt. “Right. Well, I’ll get back soon then.” “Yes, please do.” The woman turned around and left.

Someone who works in the field of arts and culture does not need to be especially sentimental to get immediately overwhelmed by bitter feelings in such a situation. Not everybody would have been so considerate as the woman in this example. Others might turn around and walk away without any intention of returning. After the October lockdown, galleries and museums in Ljubljana were open for a few weeks in March but closed in April, only to reopen now again. However, theatres and concert venues remain closed.

As in many other countries and cities these days, entering a gallery or museum feels like they all host Da Vincis or Giottos or some other treasures that might demand special precautionary measures to avoid being damaged or stolen. The number of visitors equals the number of guards, their faces all covered, while public debates on burkas seem long forgotten. At the moment, entering an exhibition space gives us the false impression that spectators and guards – so few in numbers – are both in on a secret heist plan, the dramatic silence in those spaces of epic time proportions somehow seems to suggest there is a silent countdown, as if they all just waited for the right moment. It’s tense, silent and lonesome.

[1] The exhibition Autography, Uncanniness, Rebellion shows the work of the late photographer Božidar Dolenc (1950–2008) for the first time since his artistic estate was donated to the Modern Gallery and Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova by his brother in 2016. In addition to his known and previously exhibited photo cycles, which were especially selected and curated for the occasion, an extensive photo corpus from the neatly and precisely organized boxes containing thousands of negatives and contact sheets will be shown for the very first time and will give an astonishing overview of the cultural, artistic and activist landscape of Ljubljana from the period between 1976 and the early 1990s. The exhibition serves as a reminder at a time when Ljubljana and Slovenia have turned into potential past versions of themselves, something everybody once thought we had managed to escape from, unlike neighboring Republics of Serbia and Croatia. In view of the current pandemic and the extreme right-wing politics of prime minister Janez Janša and his government, the 30th Anniversary of the state’s independence day represents a historic and momentous anti-climax for 70 % of Slovenes. Votes for right-wing parties in the Republic of Slovenia have never exceeded 30 % and have always required coalitions with opportunistic centrist parties, which have formed and disintegrated on a regular basis for the last 15 years.

Last year, when the Slovene right-wing government led by prime minister Janez Janša used the pandemic as an opportunity to mob the domestic population with over-exaggerated, constantly changing lockdown measures, police curfews and prohibitions of public gatherings etc. in order to distract people from an administrative and legislative **coup d'état**, Ljubljana turned into a calm and deserted city that almost resembled one of those countryside spa towns. When one tries to imagine the city without billboards and visual advertising and instead goes on to picture the general urban greyness of the socialist urbanism we once knew, there's hardly any better moment to experience what Ljubljana looked and felt like in the 1970s. It's exactly like the provincial and boring Slovene towns my friends and I couldn't wait to get out of.

The Slovene version of **orbanization** during the pandemic has been so severe since the new government took over that some leading international media outlets have suddenly felt the need to report on it, especially after Janša congratulated Trump on his win on Twitter days before any conclusive electoral results. The European international affairs leaders were stunned and numb watching how one small and rather insignificant member state's leader became even more radical than Orban. (This, however, was a surprise only to those who didn't know Janša.) The governing political mob that used the undecided, naive or opportunistic centrists to form a coalition in March 2020 (including the centrist party, which was initially formed to oppose Janša and went on to win the 2014 elections) consists of the former Slovene Communist Party's offspring, which was once considered a radicalized and therefore dangerous faction.

In only a few months, the free and liberal state of the Republic of Slovenia was drowned by the dominant political forces and experienced something not seen since the Italian fascists took over in 1941. The ongoing protests by cyclists and artists in Ljubljana and some other Slovene cities each Friday and the Thursdays gatherings in front of The Ministry of Culture lost momentum during the winter lockdown or were saving their strength for spring. However, on 27th of April 2021, the day Slovenia celebrates Resistance Day to remember the uprising against Nazi and fascist occupation of its territories in 1941, more than 10.000 citizens gathered on the streets of Ljubljana, despite the police ban on all public gatherings, which the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia has since also declared unconstitutional.

During his first tenure as Minister of Culture, Dr. Vasko Simoniti, a retired professor of history from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Ljubljana, and his cabinet have started an all-out attack on artists, freelancers and cultural institutions: first by changing the legislation, then by replacing the directors of museums, galleries and other public cultural institutions with an army of incompetent and obedient soldiers. "Even if the artists themselves cannot believe it, totalitarianism believes there's no more dangerous and subversive thing than arts and culture", Dr. Lev Kreft, a philosopher, professor of aesthetics and former politician, remarked in an interview with a daily newspaper a few weeks ago. No person alive in Ljubljana has experienced anything as destructive and hostile as the measures taken by the present government against the arts and culture sector. The prime minister Janez Janša is familiar with a critical public, since it was

the civil society – intellectuals, artists and cultural workers – who mobilized and protested when he went on trial before the Yugoslav Army Court in spring and summer of 1988.

The story of success the now disbanded liberal party of the Republic of Slovenia once boasted about, the story of Slovenia's relatively quick economic and political rise during the 1990s and early 2000s, is no longer being told. Still, Janša's trumpistic political strategies were established long before Trump, around the time he was illegally selling weapons to the different factions fighting the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s. He has never been officially charged or put on trial due to the statute of limitations. The inability of the Slovene legal system to prosecute Janša and his mob has had grave political consequences, as it helped boost the extreme right.

When looking back on the last five decades, one realizes that the political crisis that brought an end to Socialist Yugoslavia was arguably closely connected with the crackdown on the progressive forces of the student movements and liberal policies of the communist headquarters between 1968 and 1972, and was made even worse by allowing the conservatives to lead the state and federal communist parties in 1972. However, unlike our current government's direct attacks on artists and cultural workers and the contemporary right-wing demagogy, constantly accusing artists and cultural workers of being parasites and slackers, the former central committees of the Slovene Communist Party had never or seldom dared to attack artists and cultural workers. At least, never because of their artistic or cultural work. Such conflicts had to be avoided, or more precisely: other reasons had to be found so that artistic and cultural labor and work could still be viewed as sacred relics of the socialist system. Once, the former Yugoslavian despot Tito, the most bourgeois fashion lover among ex-socialist leaders, declared at the opening of The Dubrovnik Summer Games, a festival of arts and culture organized by the citizens of this ancient city: "Only the best from arts and culture is good enough for the Yugoslav working class." In the realm of contemporary dance the best meant mostly American companies, from Limon to Graham, from Taylor, Nikolais and Tatley to Cunningham and – however surprising this might be – even Anna Halprin's company performed at the Zagreb Music Biennial in 1963.

Although we know about the cases of Slovene artists and intellectuals suffering because of their critical attitudes (mostly connected to their general social and political criticism, not so much their artistic and cultural work), arts and culture were very highly respected in the previous system. When the authorities of the socialist one-party system considered some artists or cultural workers to be a threat to the development of the working class, they usually employed different tactics: they took care of their social status and research or artistic conditions and made sure they wouldn't gain too much publicity.[2] Working on the margins, out of the public eye and outside mainstream socialist media attention, in the underground and basements of Ljubljana, the arts, culture and activist work flourished in unforeseen ways during the late 1970s and 1980s. Knowledge, skills, creativity and ideas from the 1960s helped the witty cultural and intellectual products of the extended underground studio work generation turn Ljubljana into one of the most artistically and intellectually exciting cities in Eastern Europe.

[2] The Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who held some ad hoc and insignificant secretary job at the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences in the mid-1970s, never forgets to mention how he managed to live on an invaluable residency from the state to do nothing for more than a decade. However, he always adds that he would have had a hard time securing such a position as a dissident. However, we do know of some individuals or collectives, such as writers Edvard Kocbek, Angela Vode or Jože Pučnik, who were banned from performing publicly in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia.

There is one event in particular that opened the valves of Ljubljana's cultural underground in October of 1977. The students of a local high school in the Moste district of Ljubljana organized a concert for their school band without knowing they were just about to listen to songs originating in the new Western rock music trend called *punk*. This band turned their guitar sound into a harsh-sounding critical force. The name of the band was Pankrti, a word composition that phonetically incorporates the English *punk* into the Slovene word for **bastards**. A year later, the label of The Slovene National Radio and Television released their first single, **Ljubljana is Sick (Lublana je bulana, 1978)**, which turned the band into a social, political and cultural phenomenon that changed the face of the city and of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia.

The political establishment quickly became terrified and tried to stop the emerging punk movement with ridiculous accusations and actions, such as the Nazi Punk Scandal in which punk youngsters were accused of drawing Nazi symbols throughout Ljubljana. However, the public degradation was not successful. The advent of this new public force overwhelmed the dysfunctional Slovene socialist system, and there was no turning back. Different socialist institutions quickly started to embrace these new voices and found their radical humor (so-called groucho-marxism) extremely entertaining, witty and productive. The punk movement quickly spread throughout the whole of Yugoslavia and became the foundation for different cultural, social and activist movements. One of them was *the new wave*, which declared the urban culture of Socialist Yugoslavia to be the **Seventh Republic**[3]. It seems this might be the only true, vivid, multicultural, multinational and somehow »federal« remnant of Socialist Yugoslavia that still lives on today. Moreover, the artistic and cultural heritage of Socialist Yugoslavia is still responsible for the growing interest in Slovenia's international artistic and curatorial landscape.

What causes post-Yugoslav nationalism true pain, though, is the fact that nothing artistically valuable from the period of Socialist Yugoslavia can be reduced to a pure »national substance«, including domestic contemporary art from the post-Yugoslav period. One recent international scandal took place at the beginning of 2021 when the Embassy of The Republic of Slovenia in Rome refused to support the exhibition **Bigger Than Myself: Heroic voices from ex Yugoslavia** at the prestigious MAXXI, curated by Zdenka Badovinac, the former director of the Modern Gallery+Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana. This exhibition, in which the most prominent domestic curator brought 14 Slovene artists (out of a total of 51 from the ex-Yu region) to international artistic attention, seems to be too much to handle for the current nationalist political establishment of Slovenia. Their current cultural mission is to produce pure and beautiful Slovene art, which gives them very little opportunity to support anything from the non-institutional realm or domestic public institutions or indeed anything from the capital, Ljubljana.

This city, which is small in scale but big in ideas, has proven to be indestructible throughout modern history and has built its international artistic reputation with wittiness, humor and disobedience. Throughout the last century – and especially since the late 1970s – its artistic milieu was well aware of how to critically upset the kind of public morality authorities always like to preach in a passive-aggressive political oratoria and »faint« when it seems necessary to perform offendedness. The artists have always made use of humorous anarchic tactics: how to instill a sense of moralism, feed it until it is bloated and then blow it all up.

[3] After the Federal Constitution had been amended in 1974, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisted of six republics (as in the case of the previous constitution) and two autonomous regions (Vojvodina, north of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, and Kosovo). One change that the 1974 constitution and legislation made possible was that public organizations could be founded without permission from the Ministry for Internal Affairs (police). That legislative change made a huge difference and people could now organize themselves without being part of a public institution or direct oversight.

There is no need, though, to highlight the risks and real danger for artists and the public as they need to imagine an alternative society, project change onto a possible future or return to a forgotten past.

The period between the late 1970s and 1991 was such a time, one brimming with risk and creativity. After the photographer Božidar Dolenc had starved himself to death in 2008, his "camaraderie" discovered a series of chilling self-portraits that nobody was aware of, precisely constructed photographic signatures he took persistently throughout his career: the face barely visible above the torso or covered with masks of an unknown origin, multiplied gasping mouths reflected in the arranged mirrors, like Munch's infamous painting through the filter of Xerox art, the contrast between the opaque and the artist's own figure, the photographer's visage merging with the portrayed person, a black backlit silhouette of the head – one could go on and on describing these self-images, images full of suffering and numb solitary confinement. Unbearable depictions of silent screams, voices that try to get out. Another series of figures features mannequins and dummies and some passers-by on the streets, human sculptures and statues with drunks lying next to them. The people that turned into images, the human suffering that goes unnoticed.

Life would be very bleak without both light and darkness. Božidar Dolenc was among the bunch of photographers who were running around with cameras and documenting everything that was happening in Ljubljana for years, especially in the period between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. Most photos from this era had not been seen or shown until MG+MSUM Ljubljana took over managing the artist's estate in 2016. The label ‚photo chronologist' rings especially true once you realize that he attended every cultural and artistic event that has since defined the contemporary urban and cultural history of the city. Concerts, non-institutional performing arts productions and club culture events, including the first LGBT club event in Ljubljana in 1983, which marked the beginning of the LGBT movement in Eastern Europe, as well as contemporary dance and theater pieces at site-specific venues, on the streets or on institutional stages – they are all there.

The defiant, emotional and expressive young people on the streets are just as interesting to the photographer as the people on stage. Maybe even more so. The ones living on the margins, punks and drag queens, men lustfully kissing and touching each other, women embracing, kissing and caressing each other for the first time in public; but also the physical, muscular, weak and daring individual or collective bodies of the performers whose vision of life is so radically different from the one of those who sit neatly clad at one of Ljubljana's jazz festivals, attentively analyzing compositions in the warm and brightly lit venues of the late 1970s.

During this period, Dolenc also took a range of photographs of the contemporary dance scene of the 1970s and 1980s (at the Dance Days festival and The Summer Dance School) and became friends with many dancers and choreographers. Some of them even became his close friends. »I'm not sure if anybody had ever really been his friend«, some remarked upon reflecting on their relationship with him. While some are doubting their late friend, the evidence points in a different direction: after taking photos, he would sometimes put down his camera, lay on the floor and join the dancers. When he started documenting the dance scene at the Ljubljana Dance Days and by taking photos of productions of The Studio for Free Dance in 1976, he was struggling with photographing and capturing dance. However, after having gained some dance experience, everything

changed for him. Not only the way he went about shooting dance but everything he would try and capture with his camera.

Perusing Dolenc's photographic oeuvre produces the impression that its most real aspect is capturing individual and collective physical uncertainties in the process of evolving auto-narratives. Uncertainties perhaps still devoid of memory, as the experience is still fresh and the events have yet to be translated into speech. Methodical and transgressive uncertainties resisting the intended functional organization of disciplinary and disciplined social and individual time, which always has an anticipated and predictable ideological plan inscribed in it.[4]

If Dolenc wanted to photographically record such processes and transitions, render them into images, produce them within the medium of photography, he had to change his approach: rather than remain a distant witness with a supposed total view of the situation he had to become part of it. Or, in the language of choreography: he had to become the physical dance partner within this contact improvisation. He had to experience the situation within the zone of its organism. Metaphorically speaking, he had to feel the "weight" of another individual or a collective body, to counterbalance the other body when the situation called for it, to equilibrate or move with the other. This became Dolenc's kinetic photographic dynamic.

The most consistent traits of the Ljubljana cultural landscape in the impenetrable thicket of events captured by Dolenc's images between 1976 and 1989 seem to be its relationality, the uncertainty of transition and incompleteness. The potential of new possibilities. An open space for possible future auto-narratives. And an electric, affective cultural atmosphere underpinning the potential of new subjectivities. It is difficult to speculate whether it was indeed contemporary dance that informed Dolenc's sense of the possible ways of partnering up, but one particular series of photographs visually documents his learning curve, his process of realizing that he had to become part of what he wanted to capture with his camera. His photographs of the Summer Dance School, when final workshop performances increasingly took to the streets of Ljubljana in the early 1980s, are proof of Dolenc's gradual shift in his photographic perspective, incrementally renouncing the total view and heading resolutely to a place where he became a participant.

"He was invisible", one of his friends claims, a photographer who met him and became a close friend in the late 1990s. "I can clearly remember the situation in this photo but I cannot remember him taking the picture", she continues as she looks at herself being caught on camera at one of the events in the early 1980s. "He was obviously around all the time. Although, the punk, club and other happenings were never really his thing. He went there looking for something. What that was is really hard to say. But he wouldn't stay if there was nothing there for him". Revisiting his oeuvre, it is hard not to make connections with the silent, solitary confinements in his self-portraits. No matter how much self-isolation may have been appealing to him once in a while, the public scream of the changing urban landscape of Ljubljana was a voice he was eager to capture on camera. And he never got tired of it. He wanted to capture it for himself, for us, for everybody in the photos. I guess, he didn't much think about posteriority. It wasn't his thing, or was it? Nevertheless, … he was there, he came close, closer and even closer. Click.

[4] Rok Vevar, Photographic Representation of Uncertain Bodies: Traces of the Other Ljubljana in Božidar Dolenc's Photographic Oeuvre, 1976–1990, translated into English by Tamara Soban, MG+MSUM, Ljubljana 2020, p. 76-77.)

On the contact sheets from 1988, there are a few photos of an event that took Slovenia by storm in the spring of that year. Dolenc rarely took photos of political events. I don't know, this may have been the only time. But it seemed like part of something he knew, something he photographed and followed closely. The logical continuum of everything he had known for more than ten years.

It's June. A blindingly sunny day and hot like hell. Janez Janša leaves the building of the Military Court on Roška Road in Ljubljana, surrounded by the members of The Human Rights Committee and greeted loudly by a large crowd of people. He is there – it's on black and white. Most citizens of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia first heard of him only few weeks ago. From the moment the National News released his name after his arrest, he has already become – along with three accomplices – a national hero. He seems calm, moved and trustworthy. Adored like some leaders from the South. There is no doubt the highly classified document they decided to make public holds instructions for the Yugoslav Army Forces to invade the streets of Slovenia and execute a **coup d'état** in case the oppositional political force continues to be a nuisance. But this force is unstoppable. What grew out of the cultural climate of a few punks at a high school ten years earlier has suddenly become a force to reckon with.

Spring feels like summer. It's hot and it keeps on getting hotter. Everybody in the crowd anticipates something horrific is going to happen, only they are not exactly sure where and when. Their hope is something they need, embrace and share, time is something they count on as a driving force to prepare them for the future. The coming horror is something they are sure of, the only hope is that it may not affect them. This hope is contagious, more than any virus will ever be. They are close to each other, holding up flowers, laughing and crying, touching and clutching each other, happy for a brief moment as they are filled with optimism for better times ahead. For the first time, after years and years of a political vacuum, they have a sense of cause, a vision, and it's real. It surrounds them like thick air and they are part of it.

The woman enters the Museum the next day. The one that promised to come back. »It's open now«, the young woman at the box office says with a smile, »please don't forget to disinfect your hands«. The lady eagerly runs to the second floor like there is no time left, taking off like she's running for her life. She doesn't look at the photos, there is a hunger in her which seems to eradicate all life, there is something else she's looking for: she's looking for her past self. She doesn't care if she looks good or hip, because she's looking for some other thing. Some spark. In these confusing times, she has to look closely and read everything in detail. What she once knew she doesn't know anymore. It's supposed to be there somewhere, and she needs to find it. She must rediscover whatever was lost. She simply has no other choice. I guess, one could call what she is doing a reality check.

Editing and rearranging the photo details like they are all windows into her past life, she's behaving like Thomas in Antonioni's **Blow Up**, looking for the corpse, the crime and criminal that have fallen into oblivion. The corpse can only be rediscovered once she has constructed a meaningful visual sentence. And she has. For a brief moment, it's there. She feels she needs to bring it back to life,

those times gone by and the things she felt back then. She's not a nostalgic person, but she's angry, asking herself what went wrong, how we have ended up like this. She finds a picture of herself at some club, her face only visible in profile, but she quickly realizes that she's everywhere. She sees herself in the faces of all the other people she knew, one by one by one … She recognizes the others because she knows herself, she recognizes herself because she knows the others … it's all in their faces, their spasmodic bodies, affects and expressions through which they exorcise the places of time standing still. The knowledge they possess, everything they managed to learn, the thoughts and feelings they experienced. They know they have to make it go faster. Time. They have to turn back to the past in order to make space for the future, a future where it's possible for them to exist. Nothing more, nothing less.

READING
PERFORMATIVE
DISSENSUS

Is Death Fast or Slow*?* Reza Abdoh's *Bogeyman*

Dominic Johnson

§"Is death fast or slow? Is death dramatic or nondescript?" barks The Father, wearing a ratty toupee and a face full of syphilitic sores.[1] He's a pear-shaped junkie, a corporate pervert "just looking for a warm place to fuck."[2] Someone is being beaten. Someone waltzes with a corpse. Spotlights swing from face to face. The Fifth Savior (a serial killer), bald with black teeth, shakes his slack face in the follow spot. "What's worse, being buried under dead babies or bowling balls?" asks The Stepmother. "Bowling balls, cos you can't eat your way out," replies the bad joke bleach-blond Son in black rubber. "HA HA!" The Mother dies falling campily from a building, prompting beatings, breakdowns, simulated buggery. Degenerates materialize and multiply: SM queens, cyberpunks, mincing busboys, dirty old men, baby-lickers, doll-humpers, hippie-floggers, naked guys, interminable Bob Fosse ensembles, spank-addicts, motormouths, rapists and bandits, driller killers, Queen Elizabeth I, plague clown, hysterical mother, a Boy with Green Hair, a Wounded Bird. The scenes are frantic, overpopulated, technically virtuosic, sadistic. Characters are played with hyperactive intensity; phrases and scenes are blurted out and repeated insistently, seemingly (but not quite) nonsensically. Stereotypes proliferate in obnoxious Technicolor. The lost ones scream and gurgle, overwhelmed by sodomy, incest, suicide, dancing, and words. "Look at me! Look at my hole! Feast your eyes on my ugliness!" screams The Stepmother—a luminous Juliana Francis, dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein—as she slips a wet finger in. The Father parts his voluptuous prosthetic buttocks to birth a bowling ball, which plops from his guts with a sodomitic *clunk*, exploding with a video bomb, *BOOM*.

Bogeyman, by the queer Iranian-American artist Reza Abdoh, opened at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) for a two-month run (August 29 to October 13, 1991) after two weeks of previews. Abdoh's previous show, *The Hip Hop Waltz of Eurydice* (1990) had confirmed Abdoh's reputation as an artistic firebrand of sorts, and—still in his twenties—as the *enfant terrible* of experimental theatre in Los Angeles (now, thirty years later, he remains influential but profoundly under-assessed). *Bogeyman* was an impressive follow-up: big, brash, and loud, vastly ambitious in its staging and visibly expensive to produce. It was controversial from the start, eliciting numerous walkouts. Abdoh professed indifference: "I'm not in the business of pandering to the audience," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "People who are offended are afraid of their own demons" (Stayton, 1991). Many critics were thrilled. *LA Weekly's* "Theater Pick of the Week" columnist singled out *Bogeyman* as a "towering roar of imagination and artistic control" and "the most important single piece of theater in L.A. this year" (Raden, 1991). Writing in the *LA Downtown News*, Jack Skelley portrayed Abdoh as a man "on an urgent regurgitant mission," and the play as a visceral critique of "creeping fascism in America" that left him "gasping" (Skelley, 1991, p. 15). Skelley compared *Bogeyman* to the best works of the Wooster Group, but sliced through with the "homoerotic sci-fi cut up" sensibility of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. In a review in *American Theatre*, Richard Stayton evoked Pina Bausch and Heiner Müller, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Sellars, the Living Theater and Jean Cocteau, describing Abdoh as a "revolutionary artist" for whom "aloof irony no longer can suffice" (Stayton, 1992). Stayton noted the sad coincidence between the triumph of *Bogeyman* and the final collapse of LATC—the vanguard theatre space that had enabled Abdoh's most ambitious works since its founding in 1985—amid fierce battles over propriety, censorship, and government funding for the arts:

[1] Acknowledgment: An earlier version of this essay was commissioned by Bidoun and published in Reza Abdoh, ed. by Negar Azimi, Tiffany Malakooti and Michael C. Vazquez (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021), pp. 289-99.

[2] References to the text of Bogeyman are taken from Tom Fitzpatrick's annotated script, held in the Reza Abdoh Collection of Papers 1983–1990, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library, 1996-010, Ill.3, Box 2, Folder 7. Where reviews are cited without page numbers, they are referenced as clippings in the same collection.

> *Bogeyman* erupted . . . like a heroic last stand. The shadow of death hung over the theatre and over Abdoh himself; decay oozed from the savage ceremony on stage. It became the talk of the town and would still be running if LATC had not been forced to darken its stages. (Stayton, 1992)

Clearly, *Bogeyman* was divisive. Even its champions conceded that *Bogeyman* was not for everyone: one mostly admiring reviewer included the proviso that it might just be "a maddening crock of shrieking strangeness" (Scaffidi, 1991). Its detractors described *Bogeyman* as "tedious," "banal," and "repetitive," a "tantrum" in which "few cliché turns of performance art are left unstoned." One critic went so far as to dismiss Abdoh as "the Andrew Lloyd Webber of the counterculture" on account of his perceived excesses and indulgences (cited in Bell, 1995: p. 22). "Where is Mary Poppins when I need her?" asked another (Prideaux, 1991, p. F3). For *Los Angeles Times* drama critic Sylvie Drake, who had written supportively of Abdoh's earlier works, *Bogeyman* was "a brackish effluvium," a "raucous, angry exorcism of relationships and assorted fears, shadowed by ... the plague of AIDS," in whose grip Abdoh was "flailing at his own demons" (Drake, 1991, p. F1). As John Bell puts it discreetly, Abdoh's "last works" (from *Bogeyman* onward) "were not universally acclaimed, even by audiences predisposed to avant-garde performance's traditional tactics of abstraction and nonlinearity" (Bell, 1995, p. 22).

A work of visual theatre (precisely neither a play nor a work of performance art but a hybrid that blurs, exceeds, and extends both categories), *Bogeyman's* signature aesthetic relies on frantic layering: of screamed text, sampled sounds, recorded music, and live cello; actions and gestures, vertically sequenced spaces, blaring screens, and performed images. Indeed, Abdoh is promiscuous in his ransacking of elite, popular, and what he called "sub-popular" culture: Skelley inventoried probable quotations and allusions as varied as Franz Schubert, the Butthole Surfers, Madonna, *The Addams Family*, Harry Houdini, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, and a Mazola margarine advert (Skelley, 1991, p. 15). The visual and aural cacophonies were enabled and emphasized by Timian Alsaker's astounding set: a wall with nine windows represents three floors of a tenement block where multiple generations of a doomed, violent, incestuous family live alongside sundry other undesirables (a person with AIDS, a junkie, a gimp, a serial killer). The actors work in each of the windows and also appear in front of the block, beside a red doorway, on the godforsaken street of whatever American hellhole Abdoh has imagined for us. Later, the façade pulls up to reveal the full interiors of the rooms: monitors and screens, slave cages, a suicide clinic, a drowning tank (filled with water), an upside-down hospital ward.

In the opening scene, the tenement comes toxically alive; the crudely sketched characters vie for and overwhelm our attention. When the feverish energy subsides for a moment, it is less a respite than a syncope or seizure. There is no silence, not even at midnight, no "conversation" despite all the talking and shrieking. There are musical interludes, sick slapstick humor, noisy *tableaux vivants*. The Father beats The Mother. The Mother screams and rails. Two windows over, Grandma (Goddess Bunny, aka the late Sandie Crisp, a disabled transgender club performer, and one-time muse of Joel-Peter Witkin and Marilyn Manson) smokes a cigarette and puts her hands through her cage's steel grille. Below her a man in the ground floor window masturbates with aggressive nonchalance. The

Father (played by Tom Fitzpatrick) is a bogeyman, a fag-baiting wife-beater and fantasist, and a cutup of various and discontinuous horrors: “I am the Chairman of a pharmaceutical conglomerate. I’m a virus engineer. I am the reincarnation of J. Edgar Hoover. I like to fuck my wife up the butt and make her eat my shit!” There is no peace for these characters, and neither for us. The Mother wants to die—to stick her head in the oven, overdose on pills, drown herself in the bathtub. Blake, their son, is dying. Hilda, the dying son’s lover, wants war. He will be executed—by hanging. Is death fast or slow?

Bogeyman is held together by an airless plot that Charles Marowitz deemed “as fragile as a cobweb” (Marowitz, 1999, p. 99). The program lists a staggering forty-three scenes, divided among five acts, bookended by a prologue and an epilogue, with titles that range from stark exegesis (“Father Abuses Daughter,” “No Insurance Papers,” “Daughter Kills Father”) to obscurity (“The Crow Attacks,” “A Family Sleeps And Dreams Forgotten,” “Clogging Dance”). Hilda (played by Tom Pearl), a queer terrorist with a purple unicorn horn, is plotting to bomb the Central Committee (of the drug company, the insurance company, the government—they seem to run together) for hiding a cure for HIV/AIDS in the company vault, dooming Blake (C. Gerrod Harris), his sick lover, to die. Among his targets is the Chairman of the Central Committee, Blake’s father—The Father—whose crimes include ensuring the passage of a National Health Act Amendment, which mandates that:

> The unfit are to be denied medical service of any kind unless they agree to sterilization. Strongly recommended in certain cases: the removal of the genitalia, the uteri, and the sewing up of the anal sphincter. Unfitness is to be determined by a board of doctors, clergymen, and accountants.

Hilda is aided in his *guerrilismo* by Blake’s brothers—Billy, a sensitive soul who joined the navy and came back singing Spanish songs (Peter Jacobs), and The Bugle Boy (Ken Roht), a golden-haired gay-bashing daddy’s boy who also appears in drag as Lorna, and who will commit suicide at the play’s end, in desperation or remorse, or both. In the confusion surrounding the bomb plot, Hilda steals the magic bullet (antiretroviral fairy dust) and Blake is cured, which triggers an earthquake. (There will be many earthquakes.) Hilda’s telegram to the Central Committee—read aloud by The Father—is a moody, ambivalent homicide note:

> The end is near period
> What would you do if you found a dead child question mark
> Think about millions of mothers who are going to be left childless exclamation mark
>
> I’m devastated that I could be capable of such an act
> But explosions are necessary colon . . .
> Like blood clots
> Like earthquakes
> Like rain . . .
>
> I’m going to blow you.

I'm going to blow you up. I think
I'm going to blow all you
cocksuckers up.
This is totally against my nature period . . .

I'm not an emotional person period
I often feel myself separate from my body
and turn into a bird comma or a tree comma
or a bug period
That's all I have to say period
I hope you don't get to pray
before you are blown up

signed, Hilda

P.S. In heaven there is no cholesterol period

Hilda bombs the Committee's boardroom, killing The Father, an event that gives rise to a celebratory "Japanese Girl Dance." But The Father has a way of not staying dead and resumes his campaign of terror, molestation, and abuse. Hilda is apprehended—double-crossed by the Bugle Boy—and castrated and hanged. Later, he too will be resurrected, by the Fairy Godmother (Goddess Bunny, freed from her cage). Throughout, tangential strands of narrative seem to interweave from the outside, crashing the party without apparent logic, like the beatings administered by the rubberized Blackshirts of Company B. (There will be many beatings.) A killer of young boys (played by Tony Torn) intervenes in various scenes; his distinctive bald head and blackened eye sockets are perhaps a reference to Kurt Raab's macabre portrayal of Fritz Haarmann—the Weimar-era serial child-killer, necrophile, and police informer—in *Tenderness of the Wolves* (*Die Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe*, 1973), a cult West German horror film produced by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (who also appears in the movie), lending an additionally evil (and camp) flavor.[3] Elsewhere, the ensemble sings an accelerated rendition of "The Weeping Song" by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, at the end of a family picnic. (There will be many picnics.) For Hilda's execution, they sing "The Good Son," a dirge-like song about patricide, also plucked from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' then most recent album, *The Good Son* (1990). Yet the play tends toward a conclusion of sorts: Hilda and Blake get married in matching bridal veils and flee to Mars to be "blimpish and happy" in a gaily perverse *deus ex machina*. In the Epilogue, after one last fucked-up family picnic on Mars, Hilda and Blake have a baby. As the strains of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" play, The Father (newly arisen) collapses in an alcoholic stupor during a game of catch (hopefully down for good this time). Lights fade to black on Billy, throwing a baseball into an amplified leather mitt, *thwack, thwack*. The script ends with Abdoh's stage directions: "MUSIC SWELLS, LIGHTS FADE, WE HEAR WHISPERS AND ECHOING SOUND OF BALL HITTING IN GLOVE."

Reading the script, watching Adam Soch's valiant attempt to capture the play on video, or seeing the massive composites of projected footage and photographs in person in the touring exhibition *Reza Abdoh: Radical Visions* (PS1, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019) is only so helpful in reconstructing *Bogeyman*'s narrative—let alone in

[3] Written by Kurt Raab and directed by Ulli Lommel, the film was released briefly in the US in 1977. I thank Mike Vazquez for stressing the connection between Torn's and Raab's portrayals.

imagining how that narrative would have been experienced live by spectators. (It was also challenging—and dangerous—to perform too: there were at least eleven documented injuries to cast members during the run.) Looking back on the production twenty years later, Abdoh's assistant director Alyson Campbell lamented the inadequacy of "horizontal or linear experience[s] of reading" in communicating the play's "affective impact." Abdoh's was a "dramaturgy of repetition, juxtaposition, acceleration, simultaneity and, above all, accumulation," she wrote (Campbell, 2011, p. 201). The strategic deployment of what Campbell called a "multiplicity of narrative, sound and visuals to the point of overload" were typical of Abdoh's works after 1989 (Campbell, 2011, p. 199). Where earlier plays might last three or four hours, his "post-diagnosis" works—Tom Fitzpatrick described these collectively as Abdoh's "angry shows"—compressed similar amounts of material into ninety uninterrupted minutes (cited in Bell, 1995, p. 43). Circumstances beyond his seroconversion played a role in this: after *Minimata* (1989), Bill "Bush" Bushnell, the Artistic Director of LATC, had given Abdoh an ultimatum: anything over ninety minutes would require an intermission. From then on—even in New York, where he would found his own theatre company, Dar a Luz—Abdoh's plays would feature the rapid-fire delivery, breakneck action, and frenetic sequencing that he had developed in *Hip-Hop* and *Bogeyman*.

Audiences were guided in their reading of *Bogeyman* by an instructive program note by Doug Sadownick, a self-described "writer who does not hesitate to see the world through queer eyes," situating the play in its political and social context:

> I will say that those cursed enough to see the world as nightmare have the delicate burden of leading others out of the militant denial of this nightmare. I will say that this denial, and not the nightmare, is the Bogeyman . . . [Abdoh's work] says, through song and dance, that beneath the façade of George Bush's Norman Rockwell America, is a rude knock on the door which any conscious person can hear: Rodney King, BCCI, Ramona Gardens, one AIDS death every seven minutes. (Sadownick, 1991)

The references sketched an up-to-date portrait of state-sanctioned violence and corruption in the United States in general and Los Angeles in particular, circa 1991. In March of that year, Rodney King had been brutalized by LAPD officers after a botched arrest; a bystander's video footage showed officers kicking King's prone body repeatedly and beating him with batons while other policemen stood by. (The LA riots would erupt one year later, when those same officers were acquitted on related charges.) In July, the BCCI banking scandal implicated the American government (and international notables including Saddam Hussein and Colombia's Medellín Drug Cartel) in money laundering and major fraud. On August 4, while *Bogeyman* was in rehearsals, an unarmed gang member was shot by police in the Ramona Gardens Housing Project. Meanwhile, the number of AIDS-related deaths had nearly doubled during George H. W. Bush's presidency (1989–1993), despite his "kinder, gentler" rhetoric. In his program note Sadownick had also alluded to the precarious fate of AB101, an impending bill outlawing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation in California. On September 30, while *Bogeyman*'s run entered its finals weeks, California Governor Pete Wilson vetoed the bill, setting off mass demonstrations in Los Angeles and San Francisco.[4]

Critics recognized the pervasiveness of AIDS (and dying from AIDS) as one of *Bogeyman*'s central themes. Writing in *TheaterWeek*, Charles *Marowitz* described the play as "a gay inferno" and observed that Abdoh "has found horrifying parallels between his own fragile mortality (he is HIV-positive) and the cruelty of a society that encourages a brutal psychopathology as a normal way of life" (Marowitz, 1999, p. 99). Sylvie Drake, who had portrayed Abdoh as LA's answer to New York experimental theatre, linked her aesthetic disappointment with his latest play—its "frantic" pace, its "hysterical, manic, absurdist, nihilistic" pitch, its "violence and provocation"—to his illness. "When all is spewed and done," she wrote, with some insensitivity, "*Bogeyman* is the diatribe of the little-boy-lost in Abdoh who is secretly yearning for the chance he may not get to grow up" (Drake, 1991). (Abdoh would die only four years later, from an AIDS-related illness, at the age of thirty-two.) Writing in LA's gay alt-weekly, Doug Sadownick argued that his "canonization" by critics like Drake "de-queers Abdoh for the sake of post-modern legitimacy." Heralding *Bogeyman* as a "hot, boisterous, brilliant anthem for our 'special interest group,'" Sadownick concluded: "if the straight critics—the ones who want to pronounce Abdoh as the 'enfant terrible' of an emerging arts mecca—don't like that, then fuck 'em."[5] *Bogeyman* is notably unequivocal in bringing AIDS into the picture. Indeed, the play's lights come up on Cliff Diller—the sole HIV-positive person in the cast of eleven—lying half-naked on the sidewalk, dying or dead. Diller would die of AIDS one year later, aged twenty-seven (Athey, 1992, pp. 16-17). Is death fast or slow?

After Abdoh's diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1989, the AIDS crisis—its social and political context, as well as his personal experiences—inflected all of his subsequent work, providing its sustained theme, and undergirding its aesthetic, speed, and tone. In *Quotations from a Ruined City* (1994), his final and arguably best-known work, Abdoh situated the AIDS crisis among a series of historical atrocities, including slavery and the Holocaust and the then ongoing genocide in Bosnia—an experience Elinor Fuchs described as like watching "bare, forked animal[s] . . . crawling towards each other over the bone yard of human culture" (Fuchs, 1999, pp. 152–53). But Abdoh's so-called "angry" works are not activist in any conventional sense. Neither pedagogical nor didactic, they do not raise awareness, as such, or appeal directly for active solutions in the treatment or prevention of HIV/AIDS.[6] Rather, Abdoh's works veered toward a confounding refusal of intelligibility and efficacy, incorporating ambiguous, ethically dubious, or otherwise challenging source materials, as if to actively interrupt the political viability of his interventions. In *The Law of Remains* (1992), for example, actors reenact grisly passages from the police reports on the arrest of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer—Abdoh was particularly intrigued by Dahmer's sexuality—alongside Minstrel Show routines, folk songs, and snippets from Hitchcock movies and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.[7] One reviewer described *The Law of Remains* as a "disturbing work that runs amok in its own imagination," "continually undermin[ing] its own political ambitions" via seeming celebrations of "sexual mutilation, necrophilia, and cannibalism" (Holden, 1999, p. 102).

In courting the inassimilable, Abdoh partook in a distinct moment in queer politics in Los Angeles, where Abdoh had lived for over a decade. By the late 1980s, distinct fault lines in the local LGBT geography had been exacerbated by the AIDS crisis. West Hollywood (or WeHo), already known as a "gay ghetto" in the 1970s, was well established as greater LA's commercial gay district and a hub of sorts for

[4] In the performance captured on Adam Soch's Bogeyman video, Hilda/Tom Pearl refers to the AB101 veto with an unscripted addition, to audience applause: "Kiss my ass, Pete Wilson, we're here to stay!"

[5] Sadownick reviewed the production for Frontiers, a Southern California LGBT alternative newsweekly. The clipping lacks bibliographic information.

[6] In this they are distinct from contemporaneous works by artists and groups often associated with ACT UP, such as Tim Miller, David Wojnarowicz, Gregg Bordowitz, Gran Fury, Karen Finley, or Diamanda Galás. In such works as Miller's My Queer Body (1992) or Finley's A Certain Level of Denial (1992), for example, the artists used the form of the confessional monologue to create experiences of community or communion among their audiences, combining narratives of personal disclosure with outbursts of humor and exorcisms of grief and rage, while also providing practical opportunities for the dissemination of information.

[7] The Law of Remains was conceived as the conclusion of Abdoh's "Bogeyman Trilogy," after The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice and Bogeyman.

reformist, assimilationist gay culture. (In 1984, West Hollywood incorporated itself as a separate municipality, with a gay majority on the city council.) But the most radical activism around HIV/AIDS was centered elsewhere. According to Don Kilhefner, cofounder of the Gay Liberation Front in 1968, "the first militant, visible gay community" had emerged in East LA, in neighborhoods like Echo Park and Silver Lake:

> West Hollywood-ites were initially resistant, at times even hostile, to the cause of gay liberation in the late '60s and early '70s. It wasn't just about politics. There was a class divide as well. The stereotypes, largely true for the time, were that the gays to the east were more hippie, with long hair and beards, while the residents of West Hollywood were more clean-cut—what some called "sweater gays". (Pener, 2017)

Echo Park and Silver Lake in the 1980s were still largely ungentrified neighborhoods, populated by immigrants and working-class people, often of color, and home to many of Los Angeles's alternative book, record, and video stores, post-punk and industrial clubs, leather bars, and spaces for public sex. While this west-east divide was less clear-cut in reality—Abdoh lived in an inexpensive bungalow on Hayworth Avenue in WeHo for years—it served as a shorthand for markedly different attitudes toward the politics of sexuality, visibility, and activism, especially in relation to AIDS.

Sadownick argued that Abdoh's works were part of the same "new sociological phenomenon" as ACT UP and Queer Nation, using any means necessary to "lead people out of their militant denial." *Bogeyman* in particular reflected and heightened conflicting attitudes to LGBT identities in the period, giving profound insights into the attempts of groups—especially those associated with the alternative queer spaces of East LA—to refuse the logic of homonormativity, the tyranny of the well, and the pastoralizing (and whitewashing) of the experience of AIDS. Abdoh's theatre, then, also marked a profound departure from representations of HIV/AIDS in popular and mainstream theatrical productions such as Larry Kramer's agitprop play *The Normal Heart* (1985), Tony Kushner's plague pit epic, *Angels in America*: *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1991–1993), or Jonathan Larson's feel-good AIDS musical, Rent (1996). With its assaultive tone, savage humor, and unredeemed politics, *Bogeyman* constituted a resistant, antisocial, *feel-bad* model of representation. A similar politics can be seen in the bloody, anguished performance art of Ron Athey and the high-impact choreography of Mehmet Sander, HIV-positive artists based in LA at the time (Sander now lives in Istanbul). Both artists were friends with Abdoh in the 1990s; Athey makes a cameo appearance in *The Blind Owl* (1992), Abdoh's feature film, shot during the day during the run of evening *Bogeyman* performances. Sander, who created dance works of rare violence in which he and his company performers slammed into walls, floors, or each other in exactingly dangerous acts of what he terms "action architecture," recalled his own rage at the quietism and hypocrisy of LA's mainstream gay community:

I was told we should be calm, and quiet, and respectful. I hated those West Hollywood slogan T-shirts that said things like, "I'm not gay but my boyfriend is," so I'd go to Kinko's and print my own T-shirts. I had one with my CD4 count on

> it, another that said, "QUEER TERRORIST," and I'd wear them on public transport and stuff. It was an attempt to shock people out of their passivity, out of being just a voyeur. Lots of us were doing this kind of guerrilla activism. I got so much flak for it. Even gay people hated us! (Sander in Azimi, Malakooti and Vazquez, 2021, pp. 66-7).

One of the epicenters of this kind of subcultural resistance was Club FUCK!, a notable night started by Cliff Diller, James Stone, and Miguel Beristain in Silver Lake in 1989.[8] Drawing on LA's industrial and SM club scenes, and suffused with the spirit of punk, it was, in the words of Ron Athey (part of the club's inner circle, aka "The First Family of FUCK!"):

> a fusion of the Modern Primitive ethos at its most boiling, crossed with the rudest period of the short-lived Queer Nation activists. These tendencies were then crossed again with the most brilliant old-school gay and straight kinks. Directors like Reza Abdoh and Barbet Schroeder were there. Tired celebrities were also panting to get in: Courtney Love, Madonna, Kate Pierson, Jean-Paul Gaultier and, eventually—preposterously—even Liza Minnelli. (Cited in Johnson, 2015, p. 203)

Historian Andrew Henkes describes FUCK! as a milieu in which "disparate misfits . . . reclaimed their bodies through art from the stigmas attached to sexual deviance and AIDS," providing "catharsis to many spectators and artists by reifying a new queer identity and alternative subculture" (Henkes, 2013, p. 284). The club's subversive novelty was designed as a rebuke to the aesthetic conformity of the gay scene in West Hollywood, where clubs enforced the "golden boy" standard ("golden-haired, surfer-bodied, actor handsome youths" [Henkes, 2013, p. 285]) as well as the creeping moralism of the AIDS era, which tended to stigmatize nonmonogamy, public sex, BDSM practices, and—especially—the bodies of the diseased as threats to an assimilationist agenda that relied upon and safeguarded an aesthetics of wellness. FUCK! was a celebration of that which could not be assimilated or contained.

The music at FUCK! was industrial and goth, acid house and trance, thrash and queer metal (Eva O, Drance, PME and Rozz Williams were regular performers). Entertainments might include a piercing show by Elayne Angel and Alex Binnie, a SM demonstration by Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, or Durk Dehner, neo-burlesque by Mz. Hell (now Michelle Carr) or Kitten DeVille, heavy go-go by Divinity Fudge (FKA Darryl Carlton), Jake (now Buck Angel), or Bud Hole, or a cabaret turn by Goddess Bunny in her motorized wheelchair flanked by hustlers.[9] Abdoh cast Diller and the Goddess after one of his visits to Club FUCK!, and borrowed aspects of its styling, costuming, and soundtrack (including "Thieves" by Ministry, an unofficial anthem). The club's sadomasochistic glamour, hardcore sociality, genderfuck, and extreme embodiment—bodies tested and transformed by extensive tattooing, piercings, scarification, "pain play," BDSM, and public sex—all found their way into *Bogeyman*. Rather than appropriating, exploiting, or containing FUCK!, Abdoh let a spirit of the underground loose in the theatre, so as to infect it, something like a virus.

A similar locus of subversive energies could be found in the morbid, scathing, and deeply anti-social queer zines that proliferated in California during the late

[8] The club closed after a police raid on its new premises in West Hollywood in April 1993. Diller and Beristain died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1992 and 1993, respectively. Stone died in 2013 (Henkes, 2013, pp. 292–93)

[9] In his live performances at FUCK!, Athey road-tested many of the bloody vignettes that would become Martyrs & Saints (1992)—the first part of his controversial "Torture Trilogy." Four Scenes in a Harsh Life, the second part of the "Torture Trilogy"—which retained many aspects of the earlier work's aesthetic—would bring Senator Jesse Helms and other arch-conservative dinosaurs to apoplectic heights of censorial fervor in 1994.

1980s and early 1990s. *Infected Faggot Perspectives* (edited by Corey Roberts Auli and Wayne Karr), and *Steam: The Literate Queer's Guide to Sex and Controversy* (edited by Scott O'Hara, "the pornstar who smiled") provided a bracing alternative to the sentimentalism endemic to most writing about AIDS—including by people with AIDS. The most crafted and visually polished of the AIDS zines was *Diseased Pariah News (DPN)*, edited by Tom Shearer, Michael Botkin, and Beowulf Thorne (aka "Danger Penis"); eleven issues were published between 1990 and 1999.[10] *DPN* contained regular features such as obscenely calorific meals to protect readers against wasting ("Get Fat, Don't Die"), porn reviews, O'Hara's snarky "How I Got AIDS" column (a series of increasingly outlandish narratives of willfully reckless promiscuity), an advice columnist called "Aunt Kaposi" (by Thorne) with the recurring mantra, "Stigma with style, child," and an HIV-positive male pinup photo that listed its subject's age, height, weight, CD4 count, and notable opportunistic infections. The HIV-positive journalist and neoconservative gay pundit Andrew Sullivan (an unlikely yet fervent celebrant) called *DPN* a "breath of morbidly brilliant air" while admitting that "[m]aybe you have to have half your friends in their 20s and 30s infected or sick or dead to find this hysterically funny" (Sullivan, 1996, p. 50). Its covers were memorable: issue ten (1995) bears a detailed sketch of Senator Jesse Helms in leather boots and a cowboy hat, exposing his shriveled genitals, with a score of lit cigarettes stuffed up his asshole; plumes of smoke pipe upwards over his cadaverous body. The headline turns one of the senator's quotes against him: "Jesse Helms: Deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct."[11] A sidebar teases the content inside, including advice on what to do when you're dead from AIDS, and a series of "HIV Merit Badges" (to show off impressive or obscure infections). In the cover story, Thorne weighs the comparative advantages of angry protests, political lobbying, and domestic terrorism, concluding with a call for activists to vomit strategically on Helms (Thorne, 1995, p. 5). Kadji Amin uses the term "deidealizing" to describe queer sensibilities that "*polarize*—into transgressive versus normative, utopian versus antisocial; they *invert*—the badder, the better and more radically queer; and they aggressively and lovingly deflate their own ideals" (Amin, 2017, p. 4, emphasis in original). It's hard not to see a red thread between Abdoh's irruptive negativity, his radically deidealizing imperative, and the provocations of the AIDS zines. The most excoriating language Abdoh wrote for *Bogeyman* drips with the same vitriol that *DPN* heaped upon Jesse Helms. He seemed to luxuriate in the shock that attends an ideal's noisy deflation. With monstrously misplaced humor, Abdoh undermines cherished and affirming ideals of martyrdom, victimhood, survival, and transcendence, never quite pausing to properly mourn what has been lost or sacrificed along the way.

The closing lines of Kushner's *Angels in America* are delivered by its protagonist—an HIV-positive man redeemed by friendship, betrayal, angelic visitations, and (real-life bogeyman) Roy Cohn's private stash of AZT—with messianic portent:

> You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.
> And I bless you: *More Life*.
> The Great Work Begins. (Kushner, 2003, p. 280)

[10] Diseased Pariah News ceased publication soon after Thorne's AIDS-related death in 1999. Shearer and Botkin died in 1991 and 1996, respectively, also from AIDS.

[11] That year, Helms was a leader in right-wing efforts to stop the reauthorization of a 1990 law that provided federal funding for the care and treatment of people with AIDS. His insensitive claim that "they got sick as a result of deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct" was widely quoted—and derided—at the time.

If the Abdoh of *Bogeyman*, like the *feel-bad* writers of *Infected Faggot Perspectives* and *Diseased Pariah News*, will not go quite so far as to ask for *More Death*, accepting any scrap more living on offer, he insists that this life can be an outright horror, an un-redeeming trial, a chore or a bore—basically a raw deal. Dei-dealizing collective experience might ruin it for others, but it can also make one's own survival, however tentative, more interesting, funny, or outrageous—or simply a bit more manageable. Ron Athey and Mehmet Sander, both HIV-positive since the mid-1980s, would recall seeing *Bogeyman* repeatedly during its two-month run. (Tellingly, both refused to see *Angels in America* on principle.) What laughter, sadness, penance, or succor might they have been seeking there? What catharsis might they have found? In its sour, frantic, extreme, or unpalatable aspect, Abdoh's theatre asked not just that we be free to rage at the government (which we must). We must also be free to express our shame, our efficacy, and our stupidity: our guilt (of seroconversion, of survival, of being a vehicle for contagion), our frailty, or our fear. Abdoh's characters—always screaming, railing, carrying on—portray without idealization our collective perversity, our individual lunacies. They stage our loves and our suicides, our bile and our mirth—our pettiness, even—in a time of such suffering, of such great need. Is death fast or slow? Is death fast or slow?

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Interventionist Choreographies

Kirsten Maar

112

In opposition to the experiences of isolation and the consequences of the COVID pandemic, the empowering moments of last year have included the worldwide protests emerging after the killing of George Floyd and the ongoing Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the opposition mainly led by female voices and bodies in Belarus, the demonstrations against abortion in Poland and the upheavals in Hungary which included the occupation of the university building. It is the presence of assembled bodies in public spaces and their vulnerability in face of executive force, which makes a difference and affects us.

The words of George Floyd "I cannot breathe" gained an unfortunate connection with the people who mis-used it, denying the existence of danger of the pandemic within their conspiracy theories.

But what is the potential which unfolds from these political upheavals we witnessed and shared during the last months? Did they invent new forms of protest, new forms of gathering or being together and fighting for a better future? What will be the traces left by these experiences? What will be the political and social outcomes?

One important element might be the fact that they are not just addressing their issues from one point of view, but instead situating themselves against a much larger global and historical background. They are acting not only against different political regimes and rules of control, but aiming for solidarity and thus including other protest groups. Next to identity politics the issue of solidarity has, via the discussion of intersectional discourses, gained new impact.

A second aspect is the formatting of these protests: Judith Butler has reflected on the performative aspects of assembly[1], Eva von Redecker has pointed out, in her study on the philosophy of new forms of protest, their choreographed character[2], Susan Leigh Foster already in 2005 wrote about the choreographies of protest[3], Susanne Foellmer has spoken of choreographies as a "medium of protest"[4], and Stefan Donath has written of "Protest Choruses" as a "new aesthetics of resistance".[5]

In contrast to the idea of a mass in totally synchronized political parades or of bodies as an agitated irrationality, the mob - the flash-mob - performs a rehearsed, but not yet fully synchronized choreography of public movement. Other protests like Fridays for Future, are drawing inspiration from the sit-ins of the 1960s, they remember ACT-UP die-ins from the 1980s, and the squatting from the occupy movement, or they refer to the performer and 'standing man' Erdem Gündüz at the Tahir Sqare in Istanbul. Especially in Hungary and Poland protests which occupy the university and the churches were drawing back on strategies and forms of artistic protest and activism developed in the 1960s and 70s by performance artists. The activists are using these quotes consciously and they are well aware of the contexts and their displacements. They also know, that each of these protest forms or social choreographies has to be focused and rehearsed to gain visibility.[6] In the following section I want to look at forms of protest and how they are choreographed. Vice versa I will also look at choreography's inherent potential to assemble underlying these "social choreographies".[7]

The notion of choreography etymologically goes back to *choros and graphein* – at least in this very European tradition, but in different cultures also both concepts have a meaningful impact on dance. *Graphein* means to scribble,

[1] Judith Butler. (2015) Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly. Harvard. Harvard University Press

[2] Eva von Redecker. (2020) Revolution für das Leben. Philosophie der neuen Protestformen, Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp..

[3] Susan Leigh Foster. (2003) Choreographies of Protest. In: Theatre Journal 55 (3), 2003, 395–412.

[4] Susanne Foellmer (2016) Choreography as a Medium of Protest, in Dance Research Journal, Vol.48, special issue 3 Randy Martin and Dance Studies, Dec, 58-69.

[5] Stefan Donath. (2018) Protestchöre. Zu einer neuen Ästhetik des Widerstands. Stuttgart 21, Arabischer Frühling und Occupy in theaterwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, Bielefeld: transcript, 2018.

[6] Elena Basteri, Elisa Ricci et al. (eds.) (2012) Rehearsing Collectivity. Choreography beyond Dance, Berlin Agrobooks 2012.

[7] I borrow the notion of social choreography from Andrew Hewitt: Social Choreography. Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement, Durham NY 2005

to engrave or to write, it means to design a certain concept and framework and to designate the rules of the game. Not only in historical pieces but also in contemporary conceptual works choreography procedures lay out a plan, a draft, some rules to obey to, even within the frame of a playful manner.[8] *Choros* on the other hand, designates at the same time the round dance itself as well as the place in which it is performed. Including a practice as well as the 'architecture', the repetitive character, as well as the ritual of performing it together, creates a common ground; a culture based on memory. But it also creates a specific hierarchy between the choreography as conceptual prescript and the dance as subordinated bodily technique, which dates back to enlightenment's body-mind dualism.

Based on these conditions dance scholar André Lepecki has developed an idea of "choreography as art of command", but at the same time also unfolds an emancipatory idea of choreography. Drawing back on Jacques Rancière´s *disagreement*, he differentiates between choreo-police and choreo-politics – a given power-structure and the way one could deal with it in a disobedient way.[9]

The police, ensuring normativity due to a generalized behavioral conformation and a given consensus, do not even have to be embodied. This regulating idea seems to be one definition of choreography as "a seamless organization of many heterogeneous elements in motion" as Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović have pointed out in their book *Public Sphere by Performance.*[10]

But it is not only choreography's potential to assign and to arrange, but also its emancipatory potential, which has to be articulated and actualized by the figure of the dancer: The choreo-political instead requires a redistribution and re-invention of bodies, affects and senses, it enables different ways of acting and moving politically.

Two aspects seem crucial here – the choreographic capacity to assemble as well as the vulnerability of the body on the street or on stage, its resilience and its unavailability is destabilizing the regimes of control and discipline. This precarious unavailability of the body demands for an ethics of performance, of awareness and care. But does the ephemeral character of dance and performance preserve it from commodification?[11] The kinesthetic capacities of the body, which affect us and transverse the body and constantly transform it, open it to a being-with others.[12] Therefore we have to think about the connectivity and awareness, which are elements within many dance practices – as well as about training dancers to be participants of demonstrations and squats. These practices seem to be a necessary part of choreography's potential to assemble.

Rancière's writing also offers to look at the "partition of the sensible". In its original French title "Le partage du sensible" – the notion of partager – sharing – is as strong as the aspect of the partition, which is installed – the double meaning of partition as designating and participating (teilen/ teilhaben) is important to keep in mind.

If we think further of the notion of assembly or assemblage, we also could conclude, that we are not only dealing with dancer´s and performers´ trained bodies or the body of the audience, but could extend this assembly to non-human agents, and conceive of the concept beyond an anthropocentric perspective. This we could unfold to a much larger extent, but in another context.

[8] Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar Fiona McGovern Jörn Schafaff, Marie France Raphael (eds.) (2014) Assign and Arrange. Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance, Berlin Sternberg.

[9] André Lepecki (2013) "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics, or: The Task of the Dancer", in: TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 57, Number 4, Winter (T220), 13-27

[10] Bojana Cvejić, Ana Vujanović. (2015) Public Sphere by Performance, Berlin b_books

[11] Peggy Phelan. (1993) "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction", in: Unmarked. The Politics of Performance; New York, Routledge 146-166.

[12] Jean-Luc Nancy. (2000) Being singular plural, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Assembly and the kinesthetic contract

The reciprocity of being moved or being touched – or: the body's potential to affect and be affected – lies at the core of both the kinesthetic and the choreographic.

This idea was framed within the *Choreutics* of Rudolf von Laban, one of the early dance pioneers of the turn of the century (and unfortunately also the choreographer of the Olympic Games in 1936), and it is conceptualized in his idea of the kinesphere, which constantly surrounds the body of the dancer and always moves around with her.[13] The phenomenologically based sensation, the connectedness and awareness, which are trained in many practices, are laid out in this phenomenologically inspired relationality. Thus, it is the practice of dance, which establishes a contract between choreographic planning and its actualization in movement; it is dance, which destabilizes the regimes of discipline and control.[14] And it is movement itself as well as the kinesthetic capacities of the body, which affects us, which traverses the body and constantly transforms it, and which opens up to a "being-with".[15]

With its experiences and memories, the body is also inseparable from language, from images, ideas and concepts, it is not a refuge for immediate experience, but a site of exploration, in which moments of disintegration are always included. The practices and sensations generated by them function as pathways through our body, its histories, experiences, sensations, which are constantly transforming ourselves. We cannot speak of the materiality of a single body, but rather about the connections and relations, in which he engages in. These connections establish a continuum between the subject and its environment. A materiality, which comes to account in the assemblages and assemblies, which are generated by the choreography – and these assemblages are not restricted to the human body, but open to non-human bodies and as such go beyond an anthropocentric perspective.

The precarious unavailability of the body demands for an ethics of performance, which aims not only at an ecological, environmental perspective but includes at the same time the claim for diversity, for BIPoC and for LGBTIQ* bodies, for differently abled bodies, for their needs and for their stories to tell. Dance's corporeality not only allows for co-composition and a transformative power, it brings on stage the ghosts of our embodied histories, the traumata, and it haunts our collective memory. As such re-telling, re-creating, re-enacting these forgotten repertoires might be an ethnographic attempt to de-colonize the institutions – theaters and schools and universities, museums and archives. Therefore it is indispensable to acknowledge, that most of this knowledge is not so much represented in the written documents of the archives but stays alive and present in our performed repertoires, in our practices.[16]

There is an embodied archive, which collects and re-composes the different forms of knowledge and operates via different practices, in which theoretical and practical knowledge, knowing and knowing how are constantly interwoven. As such it is a situated knowledge involved in the historical, asymmetrical order of knowledge, a knowledge which claims a partial perspective and examines the conditions under which it is generated.[17]

As a generic tool, composition is able to open up beyond specific techniques and procedures, it becomes productive as a tool between choreographic scoring and improvising, it focuses on the singular components and elements, the

[13] Rudolf von Laban. (1991) Choreutik, Grundlagen der Raumharmonielehre des Tanzes, Wilhelmshaven.

[14] André Lepecki (2017) "Dance, Choreography and the Visual. Elements for a Contemporary Imagination", in: Cosmas Costinas – Ana Janevsky (eds.) Is the Living Body The Last Thing left Alive? The New Performance Turn, its Histories and Its Institutions, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 12-19, 18.

[15] Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000): Singular Plural, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

[16] Diana Taylor (2005): The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, Durham/ London: Duke University Press (NC).

[17] Donna Haraway (1988) "Situated Knowledges. The Science Questions in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in: Feminist Studies 14 (3) 575-599.

constellations of agents and materials. Movement (always preceded by small vibrations or resonances) constitutes collective assemblies, which conceptualize the *communitas* as a condition of being-with, as a "coming", "unavowable", negotiable and constantly challenged community, which interacts with its contexts and environments. This connectedness to the context or environment is an indispensable condition for an ethics of intervention in the field of contemporary dance, since dance itself is a genuinely relational art-form, often working collaboratively and aiming for minor hierarchies.[18]

In Jonathan Burrows' "A Choreographer's Handbook"[19] we find different remarks, scores, assignments and reflections about what choreography / dance / improvisation or (instant) composition can do, and about how they could reveal a utopic horizon. It is a speculative practice, which unfolds in the processes of composition – it "imposes a duty or a constraint, that which engages thought […] the touchstone of speculation is not the probable, but the possible. It intervenes in a reality, in which it remains embedded."[20]

Situated knowledges and the ecologies of practice Queering and decolonizing the institution

How could these practices of dance and choreography challenge our institutions? How far do they contribute to going beyond the participatory turn? Maybe the different formats emerging over the last decades are not merely a symptom, but an answer to a changing society. In an increasingly contextualizing, interventionist manner, which is sensitive to its own blind spots, exclusions and incompatibilities, the perspective could not only consist of a poietic worldmaking – but opposing the ideas of modernism, challenge the canon of the arts in decolonizing the epistemologies of our institutions. These institutions could create invitations, they could create a situation of hospitality, they could create an open space of negotiation, in which dissent could be performed. This space would then be situated in an ecology of practices[21] and their particular contexts, based on a collective and relational mode, would conceive of all agents as equally involved in the democratization of this space. Finally, this would include a queering of existing formal languages, a queering as a methodological category: Dance as a relational practice destabilizing the regimes of discipline and control, could contribute to this queering. By the means of touching and being touched, even without touching as a gesture of relational care.

Here, the ideas of *immunitas* and *communitas*, based on the notion of *munus*, as it has been developed by Roberto Esposito comes into consideration.[22] In his conception, community is not based on property, it is not an origin, but is based on *munus* – on an obligation and commitment, which is due to the responsibility of the other. As such, the relation of *communitas* and *immunitas* concerns the community – which is not conceptualized as a collective body. With the complementary concept of immunitas Esposito discusses the relations of medicine, the juridical and the political, he describes how immunization as a medical discourse in the 19th century left its traces in the juridical field, it meant the payment of taxes was connected to protection by the community from any dangers from the outside. The stranger was not part of this juridical immunity and by this biopolitical immunity the community was installed as a common against a fear of contagion and

[18] Rudi Laermans (2015) Moving together. Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance, Amsterdam. Valiz/Antennae Series
[19] Jonathan Burrows (2010) A Choreographer's Handbook, London /New York: Routledge.
[20] Karin Harasser: "A few useful terms for artistic research", retrieved from https://www.lakeside-kunstraum.at/en/essay-karin-harrasser-2/ (27.09.2021)
[21] Isabelle Stengers (2005) Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices, in: Cultural Studies Review 11(1), 183-196.
[22] Roberto Esposito(2002) Immunitas, Schutz und Negation des Lebens, Berlin/Zürich 2004 / The Protection and Negation of Life.

infiltration. Not only in medicine immunization would first mean to incorporate the strange, to invite the strangers into our community, especially as we do not speak of a collective body but rather of being-singular-plural,[23] we are not immune as we saw in those pandemic days of a "state of exception".

As we witnessed at the beginning of the pandemic at the Greek borders and in Moria and now again with the refugees from Afghanistan the situation of fear is used to diminish constitutional rights and to extend governmental power, closing borders and suspending human rights.

With these thoughts on the question of basics of human life also the question of praxis as a political action comes to the fore again. The power of moving politically lies not only in political protest and the potential of interventionist actions, but maybe even more on the level of our daily routines and practices, in the power of infiltrating and sustaining practices, and in the micropolitics of slow change. But what can practices do? What is the relation of a practice to an interventionist move? What else does it need to intervene? We all know that practices and techniques are needs for an actor, as well as for a singer a musician or a dancer. But how should we train for the forms of political protest?

In "The Human Condition" Hannah Arendt differentiates between labor, work and action, which are irreducible to each other and cannot be thought without each other.[24] They are irreducible to each other and correspond to three conditions of human existence: Labor is dedicated to bare life, technique creates a relation to the world and practice appears as political action. Labor is necessary work; it is the maintenance of bare life. Work (and with this *poietike techné*) means the production of things, creating a world reference. It is the production of an artificial world of things, which is lasting and which is dedicated to a certain telos or goal (– its usefulness.) Action finally designates the sharing of words and deeds in their plurality: How we show ourselves in our own unique individuality in the public sphere – whether in the situation of consensus or dissensus. This kind of *praxis* conceived of as action in front of an audience, creates a public sphere as a public action, which provides social relations.

Starting from these thoughts the last part of this essay looks at choreographic works which in their particular ways show some aspects of how specific formats in the arts (specific aesthetic choices) contribute in an interventionist manner. With intervention I mean not only the transitive intervention in a given moment which visibly changes a given status, like in the choreographies of protest, I also think of the more intransitive power of intervention which interferes on the level of micropolitics, which infiltrates by small changes and on a level of what Isabell Stengers calls minor keys. They intervene on a level of ecologies of practices, and try to change the relation of belonging and becoming.

1. Suzanne Lacy: The International Dinner Party (1979): A Vehicle for Social Change[25]

On March 14th 1979 Suzanne Lacy invited "sisters" around the world to simultaneously host local dinner parties. The task was to celebrate a woman who had made a contribution in their communities. Within 24 hours more than 200 dinners took place all over the world – and this whole event was organized long time before the internet – by phone, letter or telegram. At a time, when the gathering around food and the issue of hospitality was still a woman´s concern and no issue in the art or

[23] Kirsten Maar (2020) Aggregates of being together in Dániel Kovács, Jasna Layes Vinovrski, Léna Szirmay-Kalos (eds.) Klimata. A collaborative effort towards radical change, Berlin.
[24] Hanna Arendt (1958) The Human Condition Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
[25] Suzanne Lacy 1979) The International Dinner Party retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZGu8k1OlfU

curatorial field, Lacy´s idea to place the International Dinner Party within feminist curatorial thought created a network of rewriting women´s history [26]

Art historian Elke Krasny examines the historically gendered division of art production and art reception and introduces the concept of the "emancipated *spectatress*." She looks at feminist entanglement in historical conditions and at how power relations become legible.[27] By placing the Dinner Party within feminist curatorial thought she elaborates on the structure, revealing a model of art-making based upon conversation with others and thus differs profoundly from the concept of the artist as genius as the sole producer of art. Moreover, she points out how far the model of art as conversation bridges the domestic and the public sphere, and thus reminds of the women-led Jewish salon cultures of Berlin and Vienna during the 19th century: "La salonière" thus marks a form of feminist intervention into the hegemonic narratives of the historiography of curating.

2. *Sister´s Academy*: Immersive Education?

The Copenhagen-based performance group *Sister´s Hope*, led by Gry Wore Halberg and Anna Lawaetz and founded in 2007, operates at the intersection of performance art, (artistic) research, activism and pedagogy. They draw on immersion and intervention and their work aimed at a more sensuous and poetic educational system, which is also explained in their sensuous society manifesto.[28]

The Boarding School #6 is a is a largescale interactive performance installation, in which the general public can enroll as students for at least 24 hours in order to explore the modes of sensuous learning. Within the complete setting of dormitories, dining halls, reception, offices, and classrooms, the participants take part in rituals, morning and evening gatherings, sensuous classes, meals, including residencies by visiting researchers and artists, etc.[29]

As a disruption of the traditional understanding of education, the form of intervention here seems to work on a totally different level, it intervenes on a level of how to. It does not aim at directly changing a given system, in this case - education – but rather proposes how to change habitualized practices on a microscale.

One of the members writes: "When we do The Takeover-format, we intervene radically into a system outside the art system. [...] Traditionally interventionist art is very critical. It looks critically towards a contemporary subject, and we use intervention in a different way. We use it to intervene into a system, to unfold the aesthetic within that system."[30]

3.Sasha Portyannikova and Nitsan Margaliot: *Touching Margins with Laurie Young, Corinna and Jörg*

Within the larger frame of the discussions around a new Dance Archive, which are currently taking place in Berlin, this project looks at a multicultural and diverse community that brings their culturally inherited embodiment and knowledge to the stage. However, still some parts of the community remain at the margin, labeled as folk, exotic, oriental, indigenous – or simply foreign. These gestures of alienation serve the intention of policing the proper history of dance. Instead Sasha´s and Nitsan´s aim is to complete this history through her stories and alter narratives. One example amongst a still growing number on their website "touching margins" is the work *Corinna and Jörg* by Laurie Young, who in 2015 invited an elderly couple – Corinna and Jörg – who belong to the most engaged audiences the Berlin

[26] At the same time the event was a tribute to Judy Chicago, which whom Lacy had worked at the Cal Arts Feminist Projects as Women's House and others.
[27] Elke Krasny (2020) Archive, Care and Conversation: Suzanne Lacy´s International Dinner Party in Feminist Curatorial Thought, Zürich: on Curating retrieved from https://www.elkekrasny.at/archives/2906
[28] See: http://sistersacademy.dk/about/den_frie/
[29] I very much thank my student Katja Wiegand for her inspiring research on Sister´s Academy and their project of the Boarding School.
[30] Sister's Hope, Sisters's Academy: The Boarding School #6 retrieved from https://sistershope.dk/projects/ (21.09.2021) Ibid, 330.

dance scene may have: for years and years they attended to a large number of productions at Sophiensaele, Ufer-Studios, HAU and other dance venues. Laurie collected their personal stories and with their memories and descriptions and the help of other choreographers they together recreated their personal dance history. And as such they offered their partial perspective on a changing dance scene.[31]

The collection of singular herstories intervenes in the immaterial structure of an already existing canon, which was goes beyond the usual dance heritage based on the works of art.

4. Moving the Forum: Decolonizing and Renegotiating the Institution?

With the reinstallation of the Prussian Castle in the Centre of Berlin (preceded by the demolition of socialist heritage, the Palast der Republik) and the installation of the ethnographic collection at the new Humboldt-Forum as its content, the need to negotiate the heritage of these collections finally also arrives at Berlin. In comparison to other countries Germany is far behind in questions of restitution and researching the own ethnographic past, which so far was very uncritically dealt with and was only roused from its slumber by voices and initiatives from outside.

Moving the Forum is a project initiated by the Berlin dance community in collaboration with new attempts to decolonize the institution by other means. "Listening bodies", "listening activism and trajectories" and "restless objects" are some keywords in the self-description of the multi-perspectival project. With the concept of co-creativity they strive to create partnerships with the different (mostly faraway) neighborhoods, schools and artists as well as with the employees. Thus, it aims at the self-critical process of decolonizing the institution. Creating relations and involving the local – not only the international scene – within a collective structure and strengthening the community work within a participatory project – the project asks: "What can a dancing body achieve within an architecture of power and hegemony? If it cannot move the forum, it will definitively move beyond it."[32]

This aim is still to be proved and asks for the potentiality of the critical interventions in already existing institutions and their environments.

[31] Sasha Portyannikova and Nitsan Margaliot: Touching Margins retrieved from https://touchingmargins.com/Laurie (21.09.2021)
[32] Retrieved from: https://www.tanzraumberlin.de/en/tanzbuero/trb-magazine/article/einen-zoll-voran-und-darueber-hinaus/

UNTITLED:
GHOSTY
FUTURES

Inherited Narratives

Voin de Voin

In recent years, psychologists have begun exploring the existence of traumatic transmission, not only through the passing on of stories through affective or unconscious cues from parent to child, but also vis-a-vis the imprint that these events have on DNA, through complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms. That which was felt by one individual at one time, is not static or self-contained, rather it passes on generationally, physically. Through epigenetics, trauma mutates *genes*, affecting the lives of families across generations.

The conditions of trans generational trauma also occurs collectively, amongst generations within a larger community or population, causing a cultural trauma that reverberates outward into society. When entire groups of people suffer from a large-scale emotional or psychological trauma, the loss of identity and cultural impact continues to affect their descendants, mutating the genes to bare signs of suffering that are felt within their lives. Through mutation, history is felt physically and emotionally, entering the psyches of generations to come.

Instances of Transgenerational trauma where the trauma is a shared experience amongst a group of people and their role in society, are often referred to as Historical Trauma[1]. In general, historical trauma consists of three factors: the widespread nature; traumatic events resulting in a collective suffering; and the malicious intent of those inflicting the trauma. This form of trauma is specific as it affects a large population and is typically more complex than individual trauma. Historical trauma can result in a greater loss of identity and meaning, which in turn may affect generations upon generations until the trauma is ingrained into society.

Symptoms of historical trauma also differ based on ethnicity and type of original trauma. Enslavement, genocide, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and extreme poverty are all common sources of trauma that lead to intergenerational trauma. A lack of therapy also worsens symptoms and can lead to transmission. Descendants of slaves when faced with racism-motivated violence, macroaggressions, or outward racism, react as if they were faced with the original trauma that was generationally transmitted to them. There are a variety of stressors in one's life that lead to this PTSD-like reaction such as varying racist experiences, daily stressors, major race-related life events, or collective racism or traumas. The traumatic event does not need to be individually experienced by all members of a family; the lasting effects from external factors can remain and impact descendants. For example, Black children's internalization of others' reactions to their skin color manifests as a form of lasting trauma originally experienced by their ancestors. This reaction to Black skin stems from similar attitudes that led to the traumatizing conditions and enslavement of slaves. Black children and youth are more susceptible to racial trauma because they have not yet acquired the knowledge to have a full understanding of racism and its effects.

One group of people that are often more likely to experience transgenerational trauma is refugees. While all refugees experience some sort of trauma, war-related trauma has been documented to have longer lasting effects on mental health and span through more generations. Children are especially prone to the trauma of resettling as their childhood has been disrupted by a migration to a new country. They also often face the difficulty of learning a new language, adapting to a new environment, and navigating the social system of school in their host country. Furthermore, most host countries, do not provide adequate mental healthcare systems to refugees which can worsen symptoms and lead to transmission of trauma. In general, children of refugees overall have higher levels of depression, PTSD,

[1] Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart first coined the term Indigenous Historical Trauma (IHT) in the 1990s, to characterize the psycho-social legacy of European colonization in North American Indigenous communities.

anxiety, attention deficiency, stress, and other psychological issues. Often times, these symptoms manifest as teen delinquency and violent behavior.

An inquiry into the conditions of mass hysteria, psychoses, hypnoses, and the rise of the far-right, brings us to our current era of late capitalism – a world of sensory overload, stimulations, electromagnetic pressure, technological developments, scientific breakthroughs, and gene-modification. The present state of the political imaginary fosters a form of viral politics within society, one where the mechanisms of neoliberalism operate as an apparatus of mutation. It is a viral process that mutates and conceals itself by appropriating the projects and identities of radical politics, bringing them into the fold of capitalist hegemony – enveloping that which attempts to resist it through absorption, transformation, and regurgitation. Like a virus, which infects a host cell, causing it to regenerate as itself, killing that which fights against it, capitalism has a particular power, one that has continued to mutate itself to survive within changing political landscapes.

The forces of de-democratization, produced at the intersection of neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities, have hijacked the meaning of democracy to sanction concentrated power between corporate and governing elites, and imperial statism, and destroy the foundation of democracy in the cultivation of people's needs, desires, and orientation toward power and powerlessness. How do these conditions cause the left's protest against these rationalities to end up reiterating their effects? Is it possible to reanalyze these effects through historical and inherited trauma?

Gene–Stress–Epigenetic Regulation of FKBP5

The term "epigenetics" refers to a set of potentially heritable changes in the genome that can be induced by environmental events. These changes affect the function of genomic DNA, its associated histone proteins, and non-coding RNAs – collectively referred to as chromatin – but do not involve an alteration of DNA sequence. An important modulator of stress responses is the FK506-binding protein 51. FKBP5 acts as a co-chaperone that modulates not only glucocorticoid receptor activity in response to stressors but also a multitude of other cellular processes in both the brain and periphery. Notably, the FKBP5 gene is regulated via complex interactions among environmental stressors, FKBP5 genetic variants, and epigenetic modifications of glucocorticoid-responsive genomic sites. Outcomes following stressor exposure vary markedly across individuals. For example, despite the ubiquity of traumatic events in human societies, only a proportion of individuals develop PTSD following trauma exposure, and several individuals may even show positive psychological changes, known as post-traumatic growth.

In line with these findings, humans show variable rates of negative behavioral outcomes following similar stressors. Substantial heterogeneity exists even for negative outcomes that follow stressor exposure. For example, exposure of different individuals to similar traumatic experiences may lead to the development of PTSD, MDD, or a combination of the two phenotypes. These pleiotropic effects of stressor exposure likely result from complex interactions among stressful experiences over a lifetime, other environmental factors, and multiple genetic and epigenetic factors that modulate stress responses and can shape stress-related phenotypes. Epigenetic effects could occur at various stages throughout life, po-

tentially influencing risk and vulnerability for chronic responses to trauma, such as PTSD.

A group of scientists from the university of California, recently discovered that second generation holocaust survivals have lower sufficiency of the protein and mutated FKBP5 gene.

Memory becomes a spectrum of understanding prescribed in the blood and the body. Memories therefore are also passed on by the genetic channel. When you inherit a certain narrative and it's all that you have ever known, it's hard to break away unless something shakes up your whole system. In my performances, I would like the audience to feel the powerlessness of oneself and to honor the trauma that we have caused to each other, and to connect through our mutual pain.

Until I was 6 years old, I thought of myself as a girl. Instantly this brought a big disturbance not only in my family, but also in the wider community, as well as in the context of the communist regime at the time. The use of medication throughout my life have been a key tour and deafening factor to my ability to hear her voice, now I was only hearing other voices, the ones of insanity, pain and injustice. Embarking on my trip of discoveries, I had to put a big puzzle together, despite many obstacles I faced everywhere I knocked.

In some of the medical studies that I had to comply with, doctors found out about a lack of FKBP5, the protein related to the post-traumatic stress disorder, which gave a satisfying answer to my parents of where the cause of my panic and anxiety attacks were coming from – but not to me.

From one story to another, through word of mouth, and after taking a DNA test which verified my origin, I finally could gather some facts, despite earlier inquiries into the national archives, the Sofia city archive, and the former secret services archive. Anna and her family came down across the black sea, seeking a refuge just before the beginning of the Armenian genocide in late 1914. The family was well educated and wealthy. They settled in Plovdiv, an ancient and beautiful city in the heart of Bulgaria, where she as a young girl was spotted as a talent at the dramatic theatre group of Armenia. Later on she undertook an acting career, appearing on stage at the main theatre of Plovdiv until 1918. Soon after, she met my grand-grandfather and joined the Voynov legacy in Sofia.

In the 1920s, Fascism was on its height and expanding, but so was, on the other hand, communism. The so-called "Agrarian Party," what we may recognize nowadays as being a democratic party, was gaining popularity amongst the peasants, youth, and workers. In a constant battle with the establishment, the political landscape was rather unsettling and on shaky ground, but Anna joined the party and became an active member in 1921. Later that year she had given up her passion for acting and had dedicated to the union of the youth movement of the party.

Anna became good friends with Georgi Dimitrov-Gemeto, the leader of the party, and they continued working together in close proximity, directing their plans of resistance against the two world-leading ideologies.

A so-called "democratic pact" was formed by the Democratic party, the Radical Democrats, and the United People's Progressive party. The pact run until 1934 when it was denounced, taken down and forbidden by the new hastily written laws. The June the 9th coup d'état of 1923 in Bulgaria was carried out by army units led by the Military Union, which overthrew the government of the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union. The People's Alliance also took part in the preparation

of the coup, and subsequently it received the support of most opposition forces, except for the second largest parliamentary part – the Bulgarian Communist Party. Gemeto was endangered and fled to Egypt, where he continued his work in exile and set up a broadcast channel, managed in secret by Anna in Bulgaria and other members of the group. Anna continued her activist life, knowing what risks she was taking, and eventually danger caught up with her in the summer of 1933, when, unable to recover from the series of atrocities and tortures that were inflicted on her in Sofia's prison, she died.

> Every story must be told – especially the ones
> that weren't meant to be.
> Every story carries its truth.
> Each voice – a reason.

What we are left with today from a biological and social perspective, is that illness/disease is not an entity in itself. It manifests in human life and social environments in a certain context. The psychological cannot be separated from the physical, and the physical and psychological cannot be separated by individuals, groups, social conditions, connections, and existence, and is therefore a consequence of the culture we live in. We are bio-psycho-social, but also spiritual creatures. There is more to us than beholding of a little ego, the ego that rules most of us, and the egos that rule society.

This story is a call for healing. For the fast erasure of capitalist exploitation mechanism. For the disappearance of fascistic ways of societal control. It's an opportunity for all of us, to recognize ourselves and the others as spiritual beings. For poetry.

All poetry worthy of name is a menace. A poet in the act of making poetry is a soul forever at the edge, on the brink. In the encounters between the poet and the unborn whom they address, there is an overlap of two worlds; of the here-and-now with the elsewhere, the hereafter; their death we live, and they ours. Heraclitus wrote of those souls that are always just about to be, but are never quite yet, reborn in the mind, invincibly wet behind the ears, of every fully conscious being.

Curating *in* Context
Political and Performative Curatorial Imaginaries

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