

'Being in common'

Theorizing artistic collaboration

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THE PROMISE OF COLLABORATION

Within the arts in general, but particularly within the world of contemporary dance, the preference for shifting artistic collaborations of the more equal and diverse kind has become quite outspoken after its initial re-emergence during the second half of the 1990s. Temporary projects not only bring together choreographers and dancers but also take sound-makers, visual artists, dramaturges, critics, producers or academics on board in view of a productive cooperation. The relative de-definition of the genre of contemporary dance in Europe, often linked to the breakthrough of so-called conceptual dance or 'dance in general', has without doubt greatly furthered this trend towards a revival of an artistically hybrid collaboration in modes sometimes reminiscent of the Judson collective (compare Laermans 2008). However, as Pirkko Husemann (2009) and Martina Ruhsam (2011), for instance, have repeatedly observed in their analyses of recent instances of collaborative choreographic practices, the utopian longing for a united 'we' marked by a harmonious togetherness that informed 1960s dance avant-gardism no longer predominates. The notion of collaboration thus not only functions as a neutral self-descriptive term but connotes a principal reserve towards the communitarian ethos and the concomitant idea of the artistic collective. These days collaboration will assemble for a usually well-defined period of time, during which two or more artists network their interests, desires and capacities on the basis of their shared interest in the common exploration of a topic or issue.

Within contemporary dance the practice of

preparing or producing work in a communal fashion is indeed no longer driven by the search for social authenticity. The once influential and highly romantic rhetoric of moving together freely has been exchanged for the more impartial work ethic of 'doing a project with others'. Hence collective improvisation is not the preferred working method. Various forms of structured movement research, mostly on the basis of agreed procedures or open tasks, are alternated with, for instance, group readings and discussions. 'Research' has therefore become the catch-all expression to delineate the principal stake of collaborative dance practices. The notion underlines their contingent nature from a double point of view. The participants 'join forces' but cannot predict the eventual outcomes on the one hand, and they are quite unsure about the evolving qualities of their mutual working relationships on the other. Nevertheless, a particular hope motivates their engagement, one that still anticipates a possible future but is no longer framed by more substantial ideas about an emancipating sociality going beyond the constraints reigning within broader society. Artistic collaboration nowadays bets on the potentialities of cooperation itself. They are realized 'now, here', through the actual working together in a studio space, yet simultaneously every momentary realisation of a team's potential hints at prospective possibilities. In this sense, artistic collaboration is always a *collaboration 'yet to come'*. The shared promise of a genuine social productivity that clearly supersedes both the traditional forms of labour division and a mainly calculative individual investment logic, constitutes collaboration's



original impetus and continual driving force. It is also the normative yardstick used by the participants. They hope that a particular surplus value will recurrently emerge within the context of a particular project or a specific situation of joint action. Neither the temporal arrival nor the actual form of an instance of successful collaboration can be predicted or premeditated. Those involved will condition and try to further the kind of commonality motivating their collaboration through certain working procedures or modes of 'team building'. Yet its occurrence is in every sense of the word an *event* that escapes and diverts, weakens and subverts any kind of predetermined directionality.

How to think through the underlying logic, principal functioning and eventual political dimensions of the kind of social potentiality animating today's collaborative dance practices? Both Husemann (2009) and Ruhsam (2011) invoke the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in order to elaborate the at once mundane and rather enigmatic togetherness taking shape during short-term projects that

commit themselves to an overall egalitarian regime of production, discussion and decision-making (which may of course go along with one person initiating, principally feeding and coaching the collaboration). Nancy's ideas on 'the inoperative community' (Nancy 1991) and 'being singular plural' (Nancy 2000) indeed deserve further exploration in relation to artistic practices that are explicitly based on the promise inhabiting creative joint action. Nevertheless, they are fairly general in outlook and do not primarily address the arts. Although they also have a direct political relevance, Nancy's writings first and foremost envisage a new approach of being as always 'being with', a post-Heideggerian ontology in which existence is essentially a mode of co-existence that possesses an irrevocably split nature. I will therefore mainly look for inspiration in the work of some of the authors associated with autonomous Marxism, or the Italian 'post-autonomia' strand of theorizing, such as Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri. They explicitly discuss the particularities of creative labour within the

■ Photos: *Tentative Assembly (the tent piece)*.
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context of the culture industry, knowledge-based and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-driven project work and – more generally – the current post-Fordist or ‘biopolitical’ regime of accumulation. Some of their insights, especially the notions of immaterial labour and precarity, already gained notoriety and regularly frame current analyses of artistic labour (see for instance Cvejić and Vujanović 2010 and Aranda et al. 2011). I will deploy them quite selectively on the basis of a more general ontology of potentiality, loosely inspired by insights borrowed from Giorgio Agamben (1999), in order to elucidate the practice of collaboration within contemporary dance from a theoretical point of view. In addition, my conceptual musings are greatly informed by my first-hand knowledge of the international Brussels dance community and a series of in-depth interviews with some of its members (see Laermans 2013). Specific examples of collaborative dance practices and particular statements on this topic will thus implicitly guide me hereafter. They are, however, generalized to such an extent that theoretical speculation regularly takes over for the sake of argument. For we are in need of a genuine theory of collaborative labour within the arts that at once recognizes and makes abstraction of the personal desires or particular configurations propelling this practice. Creating together deserves by way of speaking its Hegelian moment of becoming self-conscious beyond already institutionalized self-descriptions. *Commonalism* may be the appropriate name to circumscribe its primary stakes and principal contours.

COMMON PREMISES

Artistic collaboration first of all presumes the pre-existence of an always already functioning common. Collective labour cannot take off without a collection of diverse competences, ideas, interests and attitudes that must be presupposed as being collective. The principally assumed capacities have a generic nature: the ability to think, to communicate, to feel or to imagine that co-define humanness. Together with the human body’s generic faculty to move or stand still in a reflexive way, these potentials are usually taken up without further notice as constituent elements in collaborative dance practices. The active collaborator is a productive subject that formulates ideas, speaks out, has conscious emotions, invents future lines of action or enacts physical gestures. Yet in doing so, this subject always actualizes common abilities uniting human kind beyond class, gender or ethnic differences (and this notwithstanding the fact that they are simultaneously strongly marked by these social factors). Paolo Virno therefore asserts that within creative immaterial labour, ‘the one is not a promise, it is a *premise*’ (2004: 25). This ‘one’ or shared *generic common* of course enters collaboration in an individualized mode. Due to differential backgrounds and training trajectories, the general capacities networked within the context of a specific project always have a personal nature. *One* for instance speaks or moves: this is the common quality of communicating or dancing that can never be undone. Yet simultaneously there is this and not that ‘*I*’ who says something or gestures in a specific mode: this is the individual subject practicing the generic common. Precisely the promise of a genuine social productivity, which comes with the assembling of at once generic and individualized faculties, motivates every collaboration. It actually bets on possibilities ‘yet to come’ – yet to discover, produce and actualize – that simultaneously activate and deconstruct every dancer’s subjective practising of generic capacities, particularly the one to move and stand still. The underlying hope

runs like this: 'Through our collaboration, you and I will be pushed in a socially productive way to go beyond our subjective modes of exercising common faculties, thus realizing possibilities that were hitherto unexplored, perhaps even unconceivable'. The generated post-subjective states – which I will qualify further on – are nowadays not interpreted as liberating or authentic, let alone as forging an indubitable link with a lost part of one's self or Nature. During conversation, dancers routinely use sober expressions such as 'inspiring' or 'challenging' when discussing collaboration's productivity.

It is the other's otherness that one co-stimulates through artistic cooperation that brings one onto uncharted terrain. Hence the rather implicit ethical attitude or common morality underlying the practice of creating together, which Krassimira Kruschkova aptly summarizes in one line: 'The thinking of the collaborative ... has a weakness, a weakness [in the sense of a preference – RL] for the potentiality of the other and otherness' (2011: 13). This shared ethical stance is a crucial ingredient of collaborative dance's *cultural common* or not much talked about series of conventions that is considered to be evident and socially binding (although some of them may be transgressed with more or less frequency during actual work). Overall, these assumptions have a negative character: the romantic notion of the artist is overtly rejected. Art equals neither an unrestrained emotional self-expression nor the production of mental or bodily states situated beyond words. Doing artistic research or producing dance together is rather regarded as a particular kind of work calling for an un-emphatic self-control, a sometimes demanding self-reflection, and much collective discussion. In marked contrast with the romantic celebration of the ineffable, the ability to articulate one's own activities or those of other collaborators is greatly valued. Moreover, this implicit working consensus comprises the idea, historically associated with modernism and minimalism, that 'less is more'. A contemporary dance performance



should avoid the register of the spectacle and must expose in as direct a way as possible what it is about. A particular notion of legitimate dance thus frames collaborative practices. It testifies of a relative intellectualization of contemporary dance that the conflict-ridden notion of conceptual dance at once codifies and associates with a practice already known from the fine arts. However, the cultural common informing recent forms of dance or choreography do not primarily focus on the public questioning of existing definitions of dance and non-dance. Involved is rather the idea that the eventual final dance work should in principle not deny or conceal the underlying research and production work. In a word, aesthetic fetishism is repudiated through the sustained stress on the necessary continuity between the stage and the studio, artistic representation and artistic labour. (It remains to be seen if this stance does not actually imply a trace of the refused ethos of authenticity, yet now grafted on the notion of 'honest work'.)

Within creative cooperation, the activation of the generic common is driven by a *common cause*. The latter is framed by the initial terms and aims of the project, which often combines vague questions with more precisely formulated problems. Both act as a shared matter of concern that informs the specific collaboration and motivates the personal commitment of the participants. They invest in the collectively undertaken artistic labour, and this also in the libidinal sense: they are attached to the project's stakes and feel responsible for it. At the same time, the common cause creates a collective focus because it functions, rather

paradoxically, as a producer of differences. Particular issues, ranging from abstract notions or theoretical concepts to plausible movement material and its possible articulations or choreographing, need to be addressed in a collaborative mode. Various options will be voiced, thus bringing forth discussion, eliciting implicit and explicit negotiations and – in the well-known last instance – necessitating collectively binding decisions. The common cause actualizes a potential of possible choices and solutions, a multiplicity that vastly pluralizes the communal activity, up to the point that it may threaten the minimum of social cohesion or solidarity every collaborative undertaking presupposes. Indeed time and again creative cooperation engenders relationships marked by rivalry, not to mention the sometimes destructive effects of individual narcissism. Collaboration's actual commonality is essentially double-sided, even an oxymoron: it must be defined as the unity of the difference between harmonious cooperation and inharmonious competition. '*Co-opetition*' is therefore the concept that best fits the *social common or commonality* generated in and through every instance of an at once open, creative and egalitarian joint action.

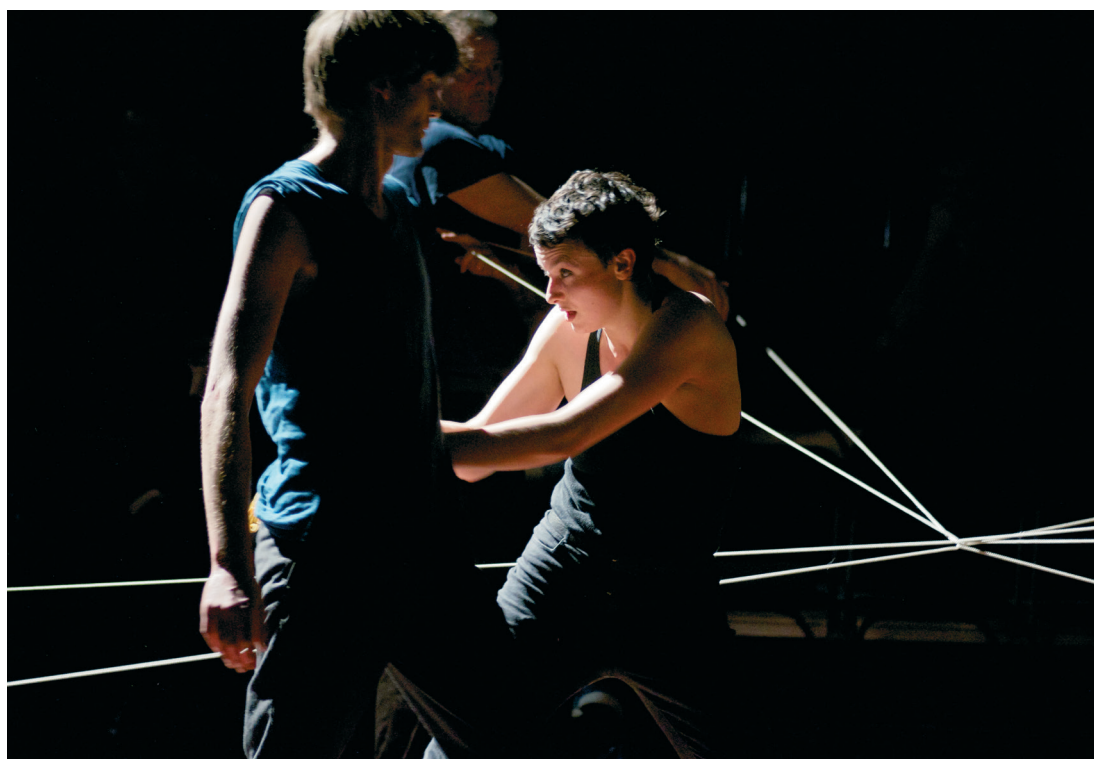
COLLABORATION'S PRODUCTIVITY

The participants in a collaborative dance project create and sustain an always particular commonality through repeated acts of communication, thinking, feeling or moving that both transform and exceed their subjectivities. As a subject, every individual is per definition autonomous. The Latin word *subiectum* literally means 'lying beneath', hence the expression 'being subjected to power'. Yet that very same meaning is also used in the active sense: the subject as the 'bearing surface' or sustaining ground for the exercise of one's will or of personal thoughts, communications or movements. However, when 'being in collaboration' the social common operates as the principal subject of joint action and regularly 'de-subjectivizes' the involved

individuals. On the one hand, their intensive verbal and non-verbal communication propels an exchange that over a rather short period of time starts to function as a quasi-autonomous social machine that feeds every participant because she co-feeds it. This is the social common's communicative face: an ever-renewed, self-referentially functioning social system made up of 'hard' and 'soft' lines or segments (Luhmann 1995). Certain conflict-prone themes crop up again and again in a nearly inevitable way; mutual expectations structuring the ongoing dialogue change into difficult-to-alter sediments and affects; or notwithstanding their collective re-working, some crucial movement phrases seem in essence unalterable and keep on informing, albeit in a 'sticky' way, the work process: these are just some of the contingent 'hard liners' ordering the often complex communication process that every form of commonality engenders. On the other hand, collaboration time and again provokes every collaborator's individual potential to communicate, think, feel or move to go beyond its subjective encapsulation. This comes down to the paradoxical operation of *singularization*: at once un-realizing the personal proclivities associated with one's subjectivity and realizing the generic common shared with others in a way that is nevertheless still indirectly marked by the bracketed individuality. A collaborating group – or, in Negri's terminology, a 'multitude' – is therefore 'an ensemble of productive singularities set to work and – as such – productive' (Negri 2008: 12). Again and again, a new 'improbable' thought, or a series of movements that was hitherto never made, is in the state of becoming. They are genuine singularities or event-like actualizations of the shared generic potentials that simultaneously by-pass and redefine subjectivity. Their sudden emergence vastly co-defines the soft lines within the entertained social common, the supple communicative 'becomings' that are by definition unstable and do not survive the momentary rhizome that elicits their existence (Deleuze and Guattari 2005).

In its productive moments, cooperative immaterial labour 'produces massively from within itself singularities that are no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging: singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities' (Agamben 2000: 87). The social common, then, no longer assembles the activities of individual subjects but resembles a network of various singularities that come and go according to an undecipherable and uncontrollably prolific logic of creation. This rhizome draws its force from the connected capacities, yet simultaneously the singularities thank their very existence to the specific interactions within the network. The singular actualizations of shared human faculties occur 'now, here' because of a togetherness happening 'now, here'. They are contingently created through the interplay of the generic common in which all collaborators participate and the momentary commonality it allows. A particular kind of anonymity is involved since the singularities are neither 'mine' nor 'ours'. The produced events or 'happenings' are of course often routinely attributed to

a particular person or the group's team spirit. However, French choreographer Boris Charmatz, a staunch defender of the collaborative ethos, rightly underlines the relatively incognito nature of processes of singularization when he advocates the notion of 'one' (the French *on* actually more clearly connotes the meaning 'all people') when speaking of creative cooperation. 'Whereas "we" is posited a priori, "one" exists during the time of an incarnation by X or Y; it reconfigures, one can enter and exit it', says Charmatz in one of his conversations with Isabelle Launay (Charmatz and Launay 2003: 110). This 'one' partly deconstructs, partly reconstructs the participants' subjectivity: they experience both a 'common wealth' (Hardt and Negri 2009) and the joyful enhancement of their forces through the repeated production of singularities. 'Accumulation of the common means not so much that we have more ideas, more images, more affects and so forth but, more important, that our powers and senses increase', Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: 283) contend. Partly inspired by Spinoza's *Ethics*, they regularly employ the word 'love' when referring




to the particular collective mood that often accompanies the shared experience of an ever-renewed potentiality, a never-drying-up *potenza* that empowers those involved and socially unites without any substantial 'we'. Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of the social common generated within artistic collaboration as both conditioned by and fabricating *trust*. One trusts the co-collaborators' capacities to work together, to feel responsible for the common cause, and to be singularized. The trust is premised to be mutual, which creates further trust. To a great extent, social confidence indeed resembles a so-called strange loop: it comes into existence because its existence is presupposed. Moreover, trust not only follows the logic of a self-fulfilling prophecy but also acts as a self-propelling mechanism. Confirmed confidence generates more trust, yet any accumulative 'trust cycle' remains at every moment a highly vulnerable social performance (compare Luhmann 1979). One participant's contingent experience of distrust may act like a social virus that completely destroys the minimum confidence every commonality requires.

THE VALUE POLITICS OF COLLABORATION

According to the self-understanding prevailing among makers of contemporary dance in Europe, collaboration equals an open and egalitarian research process that stands on its own or leads to a public showing. However, an all too direct product-orientation is regarded as not very conducive to a productive collaboration. On the one hand, it puts a highly tangible time pressure on the participants. Processes of singularization are blocked or remain underexplored, and their interim results are way too rapidly captured, fixed and polished in view of certain results. As Bojana Kunst (2010) rightly emphasizes, temporal restrictions are probably the most limiting, if not crushing, constraint when it comes to artistic collaboration in general. Indeed they vastly hinder the creation and exploration of an always particular 'common wealth' and

explain to a great extent why projects are more than once experienced or retrospectively evaluated in a negative way. On the other hand, product-centredness greatly disciplines, even corrupts, the immanent productivity of every instance of creative cooperation, whose richness risks becoming tamed according to an instrumental investment logic that exploits the promise of collaboration without realizing it. This seems particularly true in work settings in which a choreographer only pays lip service to the premises underlying an egalitarian joint action because her artistic ego cannot step aside. Power or *potestas* does not much further the potential or *potenza* of commonality. Nevertheless, much can be said in favour of the positive, overall facilitating and coaching role of the 'collaborative entrepreneur'. She outlines a possible project but immediately starts discussing it with peers in view of feedback, subsequently submits the definitive proposal to various institutions in order to secure a solid financial base, and acts during the actual work process as the principal caretaker who flattens out social frictions and continually feeds the team with new propositions. The social dynamics within a collaborating group of course not only depends on the diverse interventions of the one person carrying the overall responsibility for a project. When contacting eventual participants, she will actually try to safeguard the composition of a well-balanced team with complementary 'characters', competencies and curiosities. Nevertheless, one can only steer some of the conditions allowing a genuine commonality. Collaboration's productivity is essentially a series of unforeseeable events that cannot be planned ahead. Mutually contaminating singularizations just happen – or they do not.

The social common brought forth in collaborative practices acts as a matrix for a genuine social reflexivity consisting of group discussions and collective critique, discursive negotiations and explicit argumentation. The main issue this reflexivity addresses pertains to the actual value or possible worth of both the creative cooperation and its temporal



outcomes. 'Is it valuable?': with many variations and distinct framings according to divergent vocabularies, this simple question continually surfaces during artistic collaborations. Is, for instance, the just-proposed movement sequence worthy? Does it possess potential qualities that can be built upon and further developed through a common effort? Different answers will be voiced because of the deployment of various value registers or regimes of justification (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). The judged actions may be deemed original, conceptually interesting, testifying of a rare sort of physicality, containing promising links with other materials, and so on. At the same time every valuation also indirectly appraises the collaboration's nature or productivity, which may of course become a group topic in its own right, and often also the contributions of one or more particular individuals. Creative labour thus incessantly transforms the produced togetherness in a *reflexively valuating interpretative community* (Fish 1982). There is lack of a collectively binding poetics or shared standards, which obliges a continuous exchange of value-loaded views and opinions. The risks are manifold: one or more participants may mix all too overtly appreciation and moralization, discussions can turn into fierce and inconclusive debates, or an exchange is on the contrary too rapidly closed off because of the fear of an emerging difference in opinion or definition conflict, resulting in a communicative non-said that may undermine rather implicitly the working relationship. If the risks are overstepped, a common vocabulary often gradually sees light that allows a flexible interpretability and acts as a discursive mediator for individual viewpoints. Besides, it also specifies the common culture generally premised by the participants and the common cause motivating their commitment.

Within artistic collaboration, public acts of interpretation and valuation implicitly prepare or explicitly anticipate the making of decisions. Every instance of creative cooperation not only brings forth a common wealth made up of mutually induced singularizations but also

looks like a self-organizing commonwealth or a self-deciding republic. Collectively binding decisions have to be taken collectively 'beyond representation', so without representatives of delegates. How to organize work? What has value? How to go on with topic X or issue Y? Which materials will be finally included in the planned performance according to what sort of choreographic logic? And how to agree when disagreeing? These and related questions necessitate sometimes pressing answers. The way they are addressed defines a collaboration's political dimension: the transformation time and again of a productive social common into an autonomous collective deciding on its organization, the possible worth of interim results and the potential value of its creativity. The eventuality of non-agreement and opposition, not to mention the prospect of an individual's exit, structurally informs this *politics of commonalism*, whose principal stake is the furthering of 'the commons' through a common decision-making. Every discord, no matter its theme, forms a crucial test of the politics underlying collaborative practices. The notion of the political indeed points to the existence of an insoluble dissensus or a 'differend'. 'As distinguished from a litigation, a 'differend' (*différend*) would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule applicable to both arguments' (Lyotard 2002: xi). The 'differend' opposes two or more phrases in dispute that imply different decisions. The disagreement must be resolved, yet it cannot be disentangled without a minimum of harm doing. According to Carl Schmitt (2007), the political therefore tends to create an unbridgeable cleavage between friends and enemies. The politics of commonalism bets on the possibility to avoid this antagonism and to redefine disagreements between agonists into agreements among 'commonalists'. How this consensus may be effectively produced is a local matter and varies with the political imagination of those involved. In this sense, every artistic collaboration is a contingent experiment in *democratizing democracy*. Yet simultaneously



this particular instance of micro-politics insists on and may inspire a broader politics that tries to further by all possible means the chances of self-organizing commons, whatever their nature or concrete manifestations (Laermans 2011). Or as Jean-Luc Nancy notes in his essay 'Communism, the word': 'How can we think about society, government, law, not with the aim of achieving... the common, but only in the hope of letting it come and taking its own chance, its own possibility of making sense?' (2010: 150). This is indeed the main political question raised by collaborative labour. It should not be answered pusillanimously.

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