

Composition: Relatedness and collective learning environments⁷⁰

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Kirsi Monni: So, I would like to discuss the term composition with you, in relation to current dance and choreographic practices in the field of MA programmes. In our previous e-mail exchanges and conversations you have been quite reluctant to keep using this term. Why is that?

Victoria Pérez Royo: Composition is not just a neutral word. It is also an umbrella concept under which part of the work of educational artistic environments is organised. That's why, as a practice, as an educational technology, and as a component of artistic research it is, above all, a structure, a dispositif that organises relations and shapes subjectivities. That said, it is also related to concrete educational paradigms as well as to certain conceptions of artistic practice.

I wouldn't like to directly reject it, but I do feel an urge to identify some of the risks that uncritical adoption of this concept, or the common traditional understanding of it, could lead to. Here I

70 This text is the result of an exchange (live, via skype, e-mails) from October 2013 to August 2014. We have synthesised the text from all these conversations in the form of a dialogue, one that seemed to us the most appropriate to display our affinities and differences concerning the term composition.

am not talking about dismissing the multiplicity of practices that have been developed under this umbrella in different composition modules in BA and MA programmes, because we all know that the relevant point in education is not the name of the subject but the ethical, the political position of the teacher and her experience. Rather, I propose to briefly tackle the different dangers I currently see in stripping the term composition of its potentialities; imagining what the interesting questions and aspects might be that we would like to keep and foster, were we to create such a module in our respective MA programmes, according to our understanding of research in the arts.

KM: What kinds of dangers are you referring to, for example?

VPR: One of the most worrying would be proceduralism, which would narrow the understanding of composition to the application of ready-made procedures without any deep questioning of their pertinence in relation to the research processes in which they are used, even before the student has identified an interesting research question or an attractive problem to inhabit. In this narrow sense, composition would be an activity that would hinder genuine questioning of the research materials, leading, without major resistance, to the fabrication of an artistic product. In recent years I have seen a tendency for many of the modules that used to be called Composition to change their names to new terms, such as Research Methodologies or Introduction to problems of research. Maybe these shifts signal this same fear of proceduralism that I am identifying. I think that nowadays we are increasingly aware that every research process in art must create its own means of attempting to answer the questions raised.

KM: I agree. That's why I've been intentionally deliberating on the term, trying to tease out the premises on which it rests and to

see whether it still has something important to offer to contemporary choreographic practices. The first stumbling block that hinders fresh thinking about the term composition seems to be the habit of identifying it with a certain historical aesthetic paradigm, modernist movement-composition and its most conventional grammar. But in general language the term is understood extremely broadly, signifying all kinds of composing arrangements from material objects to situational relations, and is used in all fields of activity from computer science, mathematics and linguistics to law and history. In this respect I see that the ontology of composition might be a rewarding area of research, especially now that the performing arts are a field of interdisciplinary compositions, collective collaborations, multi-medial, site specific and reciprocal events. I'm thinking about your point that using the term composition in artistic processes might prevent real research. I wonder what is it about the concept of composition that conditions the research to be less real? Would any concept or context really determine the realness of the research but rather other aspects of it? On the other hand, it is interesting to ponder what those contextual frameworks would be that are more current nowadays if not composition? I understand that you were referring to a situation where composition is understood as something separate that is applied on top of the materials rather than as research into the premises of the composing mind in question.

VPR: In applying the conventional notions of composition, I think there is a risk of paying too much attention to the skills of handling materials and less to the actual search of the student. I remember Lévi-Strauss' description of how philosophy was understood and practised when he studied at the Sorbonne. According to him, it was reduced to a series of tasks such as "elaborating

constructions ever lighter and more audacious, resolving problems of balance and implication, inventing refinements of logic; and the more absolute the technical perfection, the more complete the internal coherence, the ‘greater’ was the system in question”⁷¹. Students were masters of dialectical argumentation and were able on the spot to prepare a one-hour conference on a randomly selected topic. The essential threat behind this conception of human thinking is clear: “Know-how had taken the place of passion of truth”⁷².

Of course procedures can be a great help in practical terms. The choreographic tools that Jaqueline Smith-Autard proposes,⁷³ for example, can have great instrumental value. But if we understand art as research, this proceduralism could present serious problems, similar to the ones Lévi-Strauss saw in his philosophical education – it “exercised the intelligence but left the spirit high and dry”⁷⁴. If the meaning of composition is narrowed down to a palette of procedures, this would hinder reflection based on the problems the very materials raise, killing precisely what constitutes the motor of the research, the specificity of the territory in which one is working.

This availability of working procedures in artistic research is a delicate question; on the one hand, it can help the student to follow paths different to the ones to which she is accustomed, to devel-

71 Lévi-Strauss 1961 [1955], 56.

72 Lévi-Strauss 1961 [1955], 55.

73 For example, in the table of contents of her book *Dance Composition* it is already possible to see the tools she proposes in order to practice composition. In *Methods of Construction* 5. they are listed: motifs, repetition, variation and contrasts, climax or highlight, proportion and balance, transition, logical development, unity. (Smith-Autard 2004.)

74 Lévi-Strauss 1961 [1955], 55.

op other ways of working and to find a possible way to continue when she feels blocked. But on the other, I tend to mistrust these ready-made procedures, since they can be felt to be “solutions”. They would then flatten the necessary intensity of the seeking and problem-creation aspect inherent in every artistic process. This intensity is precisely what focuses the required attention on certain aspects that make up the singularity of the work of art. In the process of research, finding a solution is never an action similar to that of selecting one among a whole range of possible ones, but a great discovery.

KM: That Lévi-Strauss example is apt indeed. It describes the common problematic between theorisation and lived world, representation and non-thematic experience, the *experience* and the *abstraction*. I understand that in knowledge production there is a strong tendency to let the theoretical representation override the ontic experience. In this respect, artwork is an exception in the way in which this tension is internalised in the gestalt/composition of the artwork, in the inseparable nature of the “*logos*” of the construction and the being of the materials.

For me the origin of the aforementioned problematic arises from our consciousness, which demands the interplay and simultaneity of the experience and the abstraction. For example the sufferings of our lives would be unbearable without our ability to reflect on the experiences within the given situation and to transform and abstract them to reach communication and sharing through that transforming process. In the context of creation, of *poiesis* (bringing into existence something that was not there before), we oscillate between the creative impulses of Dionysus and the form-giving and distancing aspect of Apollo. And here we can easily lose track when the form-giving aspect is institutionalised as a method and

separated from the real interaction with the motivating “causes” (the world-relation in question, the materials’ own being) so that they disappear from sight, or are not informing the creative process as real “unsecuring”, thriving questions.⁷⁵ The poetics becomes a sheer grammar, a prescriptive model that is applied whatever the experience or problematic at stake, which is the case I think you were referring to.

But again, the way I would like to comprehend composition in its ontological sense, is on the one hand to ponder it as an *event*, to ask what is happening in the composition, what is at work in it, and on the other hand to reflect all *poiesis* as forms of composition in terms of relatedness, and in terms of the “causes” that have affected that particular relatedness. The composed reality, the “togetherness in relatedness” is prevalent, the question is how we frame or comprehend that, what preconditions our ways of perceiving that. Our world (of meanings) is a composed world, reality that we can try comprehend, to unravel, to de-construct, and to compose anew. As an artistic activity composition describes the ability to draw on the potentialities of a specific “togetherness in relatedness” thus composing the world (of meanings) anew.

When I am thinking of composition as an event and an activity, I am actually talking about *reciprocity*, *dialogue*, *negotiation*, *relationship* and *transformation* between the motivating “causes” (the world-relation in question, the materials’ own being) and compos-

75 With the term “causes” (or motivating “causes”) I’m referring to Miika Luoto’s article *Work, Practice, Event: on the poetic character of the work of art* in this book, where he discusses e.g. Heidegger’s interpretation of *poiesis*. I understand it as follows, that the production and the existence of a work/composition are indebted to the “causes” which allow it to be.

ing subject. So when a composing process “researches” with these kinds of “elements”, a composition could be considered more like an “event” than an product where the questioning has reached to its end. In spite of how definite or fixed the actual shape/choreography is, what is *happening* in a composition is an *event* of certain “*togetherness in relatedness*”. What is shining through in a composition is its singular and specific manner of “togetherness in relatedness”. The formulation of this comes from my adaptation of Heidegger’s elaboration on *logos* in *Being and Time*: *logos* is letting-something-been-seen in its togetherness with something – letting it be seen as something.⁷⁶ (Maybe it is worth noting that this “togetherness” should not be understood as tensionless comfort; I understand it as creativity, as revealing, unconcealing power.)

I see that the aforementioned ontological view could rehabilitate the concept of composition in dance pedagogies; at least it has worked for me. I see that even the use of those compositional elements you mentioned could be dealt with, not as procedures to their own ends, but means of constructional reflection and focus by questioning their relationality anew. For example asking, how do I perceive, recognise or frame my motivating causes, my “motifs”, the handling of them and how have they been dealt with in relation to each other? I don’t think that the Smith-Autard’s list of compositional elements has been formulated without any relation to the lived world but are (rather conventional) abstractions from the way our consciousness recognises, orients and organises our being-in-the-world in general. I mean that the world emerges as patterns (day-night) as repetition (days-nights), as variation (Sun-

76 Heidegger 1962 [1926], 56.

day-Monday), as contrast and highlights (Saturday) etc. But I see that it is artistic laziness if one does not thoroughly investigate these constructing and organising elements in relation to one's particular study. I would, for example, see that depending on my framework I could work with these kind of modulations of the basic list: variation -> difference, repetition -> recognition, contrasts -> opposites, complexity -> plurality/heterogeneity/multitude. It might be that we really need another set of terms if we want to explicitly deal with more subtle or unfamiliar fields of perception, for example those in which Erin Manning has describe how non-hierarchical the perceptual world of an autistic person is, thus leading to differently composed world of meanings.⁷⁷ For me differently composed, is still composed, consisting of some motifs that have been recognised, some contrasts, some spatial-temporal organisation.

But yes, I admit, the danger of proceduralism lurks there immediately when using this conventional terminology and that has to be actively resisted. In any case, using whatever terminology, one has to ponder every time anew, what are the motivating "causes", what conditions the composition? This leads me to the question of different modes of knowledge as tools. The practical-theoretical knowledge of compositional processes would be interesting to share with first of all philosophy but also the sciences, that might help us to avoid interacting only with the conventions of a pre-given aesthetic realm.

VPR: This is a very nice description. However, If I had to define the activity of the artist, I think I would rather use another set of terms. In a conversation between my colleague José A. Sánchez, the artist Cristina Blanco and me, we tried to trace the contours of the

77 Manning and Massumi 2013.

field of artistic research in the confluence of three essential factors: imagination, subjectivity and problems⁷⁸. The latter term refers to a conception of artistic activity as discovering and inhabiting problems. The relevant action then is not to avoid or solve them, but to inhabit them, and see their singularity is fully developed, to create tools and procedures ad hoc, absolutely particular to the project. This is not incompatible with your description, it is just that I place the emphasis on other aspects of artistic work.

KM: I like very much the idea of “inhabiting the problems” and bringing up imagination, subjectivity and problems as essential factors for artistic research. However, I would like to bring the terms *research*, *procedure* and *method* to our discussion since they appear a great deal in the arts nowadays. I wonder whether there are some underlying contradictions regarding the way in which these terms are often used and whether deliberating on them might reveal something relevant here. In my understanding, the essential feature of scientific research is its systematic manner: one has to carefully follow the chosen methodology. Methodology is the know-how of the procedure, the instructions on how to conduct the research. In a way it is an abstract representation of and a prescription for the research process, it tells you the basic guidelines for how to proceed. And the choice (or creation) of the methodology is justified by the relationship of the research question and the theoretical framework. But in the process of artistic creation the methodology in itself might be a problem if it conducts the procedure such that open interaction with the materials’ own being and agency disappears in favour of methodological consistency. Yet we often call the

78 Pérez Royo & Sánchez & Blanco 2013, 51–62.

process of artistic creation research and use the terminologies of method and procedure along with it.

Then we have the newish academic discipline of artistic research and its degree requirements and university degrees. What are the main distinctions between the academic discipline of artistic research and the research process of artistic creation? I often confront this issue in my work, in supervising doctoral students for example. One aspect is that along with a commitment to academic artistic research comes the need to formulate and articulate the research problem and to systematise to a certain level the procedure of dealing with it in order to be able to submit research results for examination and dissemination.

This is by now means on easy task. Inhabiting the problem, as you beautifully described, dwelling in the reciprocal and creative relationship with the materials on one hand and thematising, abstracting and articulating a specific problem and then methodising the handling of it on the other hand. When we are talking about a method in an artistic process we are talking about a certain systematisation and my question is, is it possible to apply a “method” without it conducting the process somehow? And how do we understand the term method in this context? Why do we want the students to be exposed to varied methods and tools in the first place? Well, I recognise a need for reflective discourses; a need for tools that are somehow systematised and therefore transparent, inclined to criticism and which can be used for analysing the object of the work in order to achieve some distance between the manner of the dealing with the materials, the composing process and the self. But in the end, I think everyone develops her/his own poetics, it is a deeply personal thing, although it is also deeply rooted in a web of pre-existing relations and already opened world.

VPR: I think here we are using the term method in relation to two different activities, and therefore in two different senses: one referring to the production of the work and development of the research process (creation of an interesting problem, demarcation of the area of research, invention of tools to tackle the question, etc.), and the other related to its communication (creation of mechanisms to share the process with others, making it understandable and traceable, and therefore open to critique). I think that both are deeply entangled, as I have tried to expose in other contexts⁷⁹, but I think it is adequate to differentiate them here in respect to our discussion about method.

In relation to this second aspect, communication, I totally agree with you. If something characterises research, it is that it must be open to critique, it must be shared in a wider community. I am not so sure though whether the activities that are developed in this respect can be identified with what is called method or with composition. It is of course an area in which there is still great potential for development, especially in respect to the challenge that artistic practice can represent for the renewal and opening up of traditional protocols of communication in humanities.

The first field of activities is the proper area in which the term method can be tackled, in my opinion, although if referring to artis-

79 Pérez Royo 2012.

tic research I again would prefer to use another set of terms.⁸⁰ But I do agree with you. Within the framework of BA studies, I think that exposing students to methods and tools can be of great help: maybe BA students are not able to create their own and therefore they need to go through the process of appropriating others, adapting them to the specificity of their processes. However, MA students in my opinion should be able to develop their own methods. Maybe they can use others' tools, but in this case the interesting work lies in finding other uses and purposes for them and so in re-inventing them. Each piece of artistic research is absolutely singular and specific, it is this radical uniqueness that gives entity to the work and meaning to the search. Without it we would strip it of one of its most relevant aspects, the motor of the process. But I will try to answer your question in a wider historical framework. Why use methods in artistic practice? I could differentiate two different tendencies developed throughout the 20th century, one referring to the figure of the author, the other to the spectator.

In relation to the first, a distance to one's own research process through the use of ready-made working procedures has been promoted in order to escape artistic subjectivity, which was felt to be

80 I am concerned about an excessive fixation on the method in the realm of artistic research, when in the field of science it has been already questioned and criticised in many ways. The paradigmatic case is Feyerabend, who significantly, after being a falsationist disciple of Popper, changed to become its most aggressive attacker. His critique of the dogma of scientific method was articulated under the proposal of an epistemological anarchism (that implied a methodological anarchism also) and suggested a pluralist scientific practice of critique of the hegemonic mechanism of knowledge reproduction. It was inspired precisely by artistic practices such as Dadaism, for example. In my opinion it would be problematic now precisely from the sphere of the arts to focus too much on the method. (Feyerabend 2010 [1975]).

a burden, loaded as it was with an exaggerated emphasis on the figure of the author and a conception of the artist's activity based on self-expression. Throughout the 20th century many procedures were developed in the arts field, such as Cage's and Cunningham's chance operations and the mathematical and linguistic structures of Oulipo, to name but two examples. These experiments were successful as a close scrutiny and a profound critique of the concept of the author and in opening it up to extended meaning and new practices. However, it is also true that the big artistic figures keep on working perfectly at market level. But I see a great difference nowadays in relation to artistic subjectivity: in times of physical and subjective dispossession, of dispositive modelling movements, gestures, behaviour, opinions, and discourses, in a growing process of de-subjectivation, artistic subjectivity can be understood as a place of political resistance. Instead of coming back to "I express", subjectivity is not something to avoid nowadays, but something to foster from a political point of view. On the other hand, chance operations can be useful in creating a distance in relation to one's own accustomed ways of doing, getting out of habitual ways and forcing oneself to step into unusual fields or to favour experimentation. But they can also be very effective in feeding a continuous and unstoppable production of art works. There are many artists attempting to create alternatives to the market system, such as Paz Rojo's work, for example, which is paradigmatic in her tenacious persistence in her search of a movement and a presence that are not capitalisable. The solutions I perceive now as majoritarian do not insist on creating a distance to oneself, but put the emphasis precisely on the cultivation of subjectivities that present alternatives to the hegemonic trend.

The other reason why procedural systems were so relevant in the 20th century is related to a growing interest (especially in the decades of the 50s and 60s) in processes of audience emancipation. Chance operations, procedures of permutation and variation such as the ones that Eco describes and analyses in his essay *Open Work* (1962) for example, are perfectly suited to this desire to grant audiences a more active role in relation to the work of art. But in this respect too we are now in a different situation. The interest now, as far as I understand it, has shifted to multidirectional collective work together with the audience, where the emphasis is put on a community autonomously creating their own rules of interaction and profiting from this exchange. One significant event in this respect is the organisation of the last edition of the festival In-presentable, curated by Juan Dominguez but organised through spontaneously developed strategies, very similar to Open Space Technologies, that were devised by the whole group of 100 participants, all professionals in the field.

It may seem that we are far away from the original question of composition, but in my opinion we are not. I think this emphasis on collectivity is a relevant question, particularly when thinking about the potentiality of composition as a platform for collective learning, which corresponds with the move towards a culture of learning that has been visible in the activities of the last decade in research centres, art institutions and in a multiplicity of artists' initiatives in Europe.

KM: Before I ask you to elaborate on the idea of composition as a possible context for collective learning, I would like to still continue briefly on the question of the author's role and position in the creative process.

What I actually meant when talking about the distance between the manner of dealing with the materials, the composing process and the self, was referring to a subtle area of receptiveness and reflection. In my mind the term composition is referring to the “togetherness in relatedness”, to the “causes” that have conditioned the composing process. In this respect, if I am receptive, I am directed to perceive and maybe comprehend how the material I’m dealing with is composed in itself, what is the manner of its own being, what is its own compositional “logos”.

Concretely, if I am making a composition with a handful of matches, I’m dealing with organic wood, its colour and texture, its stiffness, lightness, symmetry, homogeneity, repetition, potentiality for fire and of course its cultural context. If I want to establish a new relationship with it, to create an emergent composition I have to place myself in a receptive relationship with the matches’ own way of being, not relating to them from the point of view of mere availability, not using them within my ready-to-hand world for my representative purposes. I need to free them from the purely instrumental position, release them from my governance. I have to place myself in a genuine dialogue with them in order to be able to create something third – not me, not them, but something that has occurred from this new relationship, the third, the composition.

Talking about the ethical relationship with the matches is of course somewhat irrelevant here but transfer this concrete example into complicated cultural contexts, talking about the bodily existences that are different, other species and then the perspective changes. What I’m talking about is for me largely an ecological and ethical attitude and is very much informed by late Heideggerian thinking. In this respect the compositional reflection is a way out of the purely instrumental and representational use of the materials

(or people) to a more reciprocal relationship with the materials and author's intentions.

I understand how important it is to emphasise and cultivate, as you said, subjectivities that present alternatives to the hegemonic trend. To rethink the subject from the bodily perspective is undoubtedly one of the main concerns of contemporary choreography, as for example André Lepecki has articulated. The emergence of the subject from the subjugation of the homogenising demand for abstraction, typical in dance history, or the realisation of the homogenising force of the prevalent hyper-capitalist economy is of the utmost importance.

I don't see that this is necessarily contradicting what I tried to articulate earlier. Using the knowledge of composition, reflecting the constructional elements and their premises does not homogenise the subject unless it is applied in that way. On the contrary, one might assume that the analyses of the motivating "causes", of what is conditioning the composing process and what are the compositional elements used will reveal whether some aesthetic convention or political assumption is conditioning e.g. the sameness of all the motives.

VPR: I think your understanding of composition as "togetherness in relatedness" as you beautifully describe it would definitely avoid the risks associated with proceduralism and method in artistic research that we have been commenting on. And I am really interested in the ethical dimension that you touch upon. I think that this description of composition you offer also makes it possible to overcome another very problematic issue of research in the arts: the reduction of the rich interaction between the artist and the object of study to a merely instrumental one, according to an understanding of research

inherited from one of the founding myths of modern science⁸¹: objectivity and the clear and irrevocable separation between subject and object, an artificial separation that ignores the continuous feedback between the researcher and the materials studied.⁸² If anything is distinctive about artistic research, it is precisely that this process of work affects both subject and object. Herein lies its potential for learning and destabilising, this capacity to challenge subjectivities. This parameter of objectivity has already been criticised through the 20th century. If it still has certain validity in our field, maybe it is because two different worlds merge: a certain tradition still alive that used to understand composition within a style or a discipline or movement as the correct use and combination of its rules and grammar, and a proliferating comprehension of knowledge as a service, in line with the most recent developments of our capitalist society. These new forms of collective learning to which I was referring before are positioned against this trend. From my perspective they represent interesting experiments to reshape composition as an emancipatory praxis in educational institutions.

And this leads me to the last risk in relation to an uncritical understanding of composition that I would like to mention: an understanding of artistic work as an individual activity. This is related on the one hand to the over-emphasised figure of the author we have already referred to. And on the other hand, it corresponds to a capitalist emphasis in individual creation. The danger that

81 Fayerabend 1999.

82 This reciprocal relationship could be described with the analogy of love, as it offers a good base to radically subvert the positions of subject and object we have so long dealt with, as I have proposed in some talks still unpublished, "About research in the arts. A lover's discourse".

composition would run as a practice in MA programmes would be to ignore the whole network of people doing and thinking together, as well as the exchange of ideas, perspectives, opinions and ways of doing, assessing the single student in relation exclusively to the piece signed by her and not according to her work developed in the context of the community. Although the wide majority of MA programmes I know do acknowledge this relevant dimension and in fact propose a wide variety of formats to keep alive a constant flow of exchange among all the people involved (advisors, teachers, students, colleagues, etc.), in the evaluation process this whole interaction tends to be relegated to a secondary plane. Of course this is not due to a lack of interest on the part of the directing team, but rather to prevailing university norms. And here I am also talking about our programme – we are constantly devising more or less successful tactics in order to try to fit into university regulations the possibility of assessing collective work.

Although I am focusing very much on this collective moment of exchange, I am not implying at all that the private moment of solitude in every research is not relevant, and that it should be erased. On the contrary. It is absolutely necessary in the process and it must be handled with care, with thought put into the best times and spaces to foster it.

KM: I agree. We have a great deal to do to really implement the systemic understanding of the contemporary reality to our operational models. We are still subjugated to structures that are composed of separate bricks of different hierarchical status and central governance. But more and more I am seeing the students taking over. They do have the experience of a net-modelled interactive reality and they are keen to create their future from this position. I would like to see educational discourses able to innovate and re-

new themselves accordingly. If the term composition does have a preservative aura, linked so much to the aforementioned modernist era with its fixed structures, it is of course the responsibility of the educators to update this notion, if the concept is used in curricula. As I see it, the question of composition, the “togetherness in relatedness” is at most a question of relations – how are they composed, what conditions the composing process? I find e.g. those attempts to apply system theory-based compositional ideas quite interesting and have also been contributing somewhat to the development of them. They are lively new approaches to creating dynamic compositional structures whose constructional elements are more in the realm of perception, feedback and transformed information than fixed parameters of movement. I see here a choreographic genealogy from Fluxus and score practices of the 1960s but there are also differences in their explicit linkage to system theoretical frameworks and ecological visions of reality. But nevertheless, they are compositional propositions and are of course in danger of transforming into procedural tools once “know-how had taken the place of passion of truth” if applied in that way.

I find your ideas of shifting the focus from individual execution to collective collaboration and learning very intriguing. Collaborative working and learning has long been a core idea of curricula in our programmes at the Theatre Academy. Students from various performing arts disciplines are working together in artistic processes and to some extent in discursive studies in every year of their studies. This is partly due to our exceptional facilities with studio theatres and partly because of the core vision of the “common stage” of the student generations. There is much good in present practice but a lot to develop further in renewing the underlining understanding of its purpose. There has been a close focus on the

conventions of artistic collaboration that must produce a single artwork, a performance composed utilising each participant's discipline, although in the last few years this has started to change. But I think there is still much more to explore in the area of the radical renewal of the collaborative aspect in performance arts practices. So could you please explain how you understand a module of composition as a possible context for collective learning?

VPR: The possibilities I see of expanding the concept of composition are related to this relational moment that could allow it to develop into a practice of collective resistant poesis. In order to achieve this, it would be necessary to pay attention to two aspects: how to foster singularities and how to develop the forces and potentialities of the collective within the classroom, especially in relation to processes of collective learning, the creation of social tissue, and its possibilities for opening up spaces of autonomous critique.

The first aspect refers to the activities of helping every student to discover her particular sensibility, take it seriously and cultivate it, of fostering her particular ways of seeing and observing, which is a radically different activity to that of making the student persevere in her way of producing work. The sensibility of the person is given time, enhanced, expanded and enriched until it develops into an operating mode for the particular piece of research she is working on. For example, I am thinking of the mechanisms that Carlos Marquerie (mentor years ago to artists such as Rodrigo García or Angélica Liddell) has devised in his modules at the MPECV. He has proposed a practice of creating a diary (in any possible language or material: written diaries, audiovisual, objectual, performative ones). This activity expanded the limits of what is considered artistic work and what not and facilitated a bridge between what happens in the classroom or in the studio and outside it, giving the time to observe

the ways each single sensibility has of perceiving reality and relating to it. But actually, the most fundamental aspects of his modules are the time he gives to the presentations of the students' experiences and products, and above all his great capacity for listening,

The second aspect focuses on the processes for facilitating an enrichment of this singularity by means of dialogue and exchange.⁸³ The significant critiques that Bourriaud's relationality has born⁸⁴ were more than enough to make us suspect celebrations of the idea of relation beyond a thorough analysis of its motives, contexts and means. But the recent collective political experiences in Spain urge me not to reject a series of concepts that might signal ways out of the recalcitrant individualism we live in.

Theories about cognitive capitalism have made it possible to clearly perceive how the very capacities that define us as humans (talking, communicating, having empathy, relating to others, etc.) are now precisely the ones that use capitalism in its late phase of expansion. But instead of complaining about the little margin for action that the biopower leaves us through its conquest of new territories such as affects and the intimate sphere, I am interested in the affirmative biopolitics⁸⁵ that appeared precisely thanks to this expansion. In a good Marxist tradition, what is at stake is thinking of history dialectically: the barbarism of capitalism also represents historical opportunities for emancipation. If the productive hegemony of today is that of immaterial labour, it can also work as biopolitical

83 A concrete proposal of a module of composition focused specifically in these two aspects is presented in the paper "Subjectivation in solo work" in this book.

84 Bishop 2004 and Foster 2003.

85 Hardt and Negri 2004.

production forms of life, subjectivities, knowledge, social relations and affects that oppose biopower. “Mediatisation is predisposed to cooperation, globalisation can be the becoming-world of each of us, biopolitics can be the cure and the gathering of forces”⁸⁶. In this sense, the very relationality that the system fosters has a value in so far as it can also be seen as a self-constituent activity that creates society and subjectivity. This would be the genuinely political dimension of our being in relation: the creation of dissident subjectivities and social bonds.

I think that nowadays there is a variety of initiatives in the field of dance and performance working in this same direction. I am thinking for example of the initiative “¿Y si dejamos de ser (artistas)?” [What if we give up being (artists)?] (in Madrid, June 2013) or Cláudia Dias’ research on collective real time composition. She is very much aware of its political aspects. I quote part of the description of a workshop that she was invited to lead in Madrid (a collaboration between MPECV and the Reina Sofía Museum): “A laboratory where it is possible to try out other ways of doing, capable of thinking and acting over the (cultural, social, political) present from an aesthetic perspective. That is, a laboratory that is located at the interstices where art and politics meet – in this area where collective declarations are devised and re-design in dissensus” [My translation]. It is remarkable, in relation to the idea of distance that we were tackling before, how she was utterly critical to what she calls the hyper-creativity of participants, something that I think she considers the scourge of artists. In opposition to this, the focus of her work is located on the tension between the materials that

86 Negri 2014, 38.

are created collectively and their potentiality. In contrast to this hyper-creativity, she makes the group concentrate on highly attentively listening to what is created by the collective action.

The interesting point in relation to horizontal collective learning environments is that they have a potential not only for creation, experience and learning processes, but also for creating a commonality, and they attempt ways of community participation that might give a powerful meaning to the relationship between education and emancipation.

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