

Brouillon: sketches of moving with others

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As I am about to enter, a friend who was already there says to me: “Stay long. Don’t leave immediately, stay for a longer time”. This is definitely not a common suggestion when entering an exhibition, and hints immediately that whatever happens there, it happens *with* time, time makes it and it cannot exist without time. It will take some time to realize that it moreover happens in time *with* others and *in* movement. Time, others and movement will indeed prove to be the three constitutive elements of what I am about to see.

This is how I enter *Brouillon – an exhibition in motion* in Brussels on 23rd February 2013.¹ The concept of the exhibition is this: a number of visual works are exhibited in space. All of them constitute artworks that question in different ways the position of labour versus non-work (or play) in today’s society. A number of artists (choreographers, performance makers, musicians) interact with these works moving them and their bodies around in space, as we move ours while seeing the works, the artists and each other. Everything in *Brouillon* is on the move, an exhibition in motion, as its title states, a “sketch”, a “draft” (“brouillon” in French) that does not let things rest but instead moves and removes them creating endless formations and relations between bodies, images, words, silences, movements; and thus it *works* through time.

Before I go on though, let me express my skepticism with regard to one word, or rather several words. These are all words that include the prefix co-: collaboration, cooperation, collectivity, connectivity, community, etc. I can already hear the objection: these are not the same thing and the choice one will make, as to which one she’ll use, probably says a lot about the working modes involved.² I agree. What interests me more in this case, though, is the common aim behind the use of all these terms to almost obsessively emphasize the fact that being together is indisputably better. And let me clarify: it is not the effectiveness of coming together that I question here, quite the opposite; it is the obsessive emphasis, which says that we need to continuously stress the fact, to continuously prove it as if there were a better option, against which we need to defend this coming together. It is this obsession, I believe, that weakens such terms and can end up having almost the opposite results, revealing a certain lack of faith in them and the processes they involve. Referring particularly to “collaboration”, Myriam Van Imschoot observes that it appears “more often than one can count” and has “gained a currency of a catch phrase”. “It seems as if collaboration functions as uncritical marker or signifier, an honorific that must signal more than it

¹ *Brouillon – an exhibition in motion* was presented on 23rd and 24th February 2013 in the frame of *Performatik 2013* Festival in *Argos*, a centre for arts and media, in Brussels. The performance artists who took part in it were: Boris Charmatz, Eduard Gabia, Mette Ingvartsen, Latifa Laâbissi, Jan Ritsema, Tim Etchells and Michael Schmid (musician/vocalist). The artworks presented were by: Heman Chong, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Sung Hwan Kim, Július Koller, Pierre Leguillon, Gustav Metzger, Jean-Luc Moulène, Hans Op de Beeck, Jean-Gabriel Périot, Ruti Sela and Mayaan Amir, Mladen Stilinović, Roberto Verde & Geraldine Py, Angel Vergara Santiago, a.o. The project was curated by Boris Charmatz, Martina Hochmuth (*Musée de la danse*) and Ive Stevenheydens (*Argos*). See also: <http://www.kaaitheater.be/en/e1126/brouillon/>

² Bojana Cvejic’s text on “collectivity” and “collaboration” for example, attempted in a very interesting way to point to the distinct processes involved in these terms. See: Cvejic, Bojana. “Collectivity? You mean collaboration”, 2005, [Online] < http://republicart.net/disc/aap/cvejic01_en.htm > [Accessed 18 March 2013].

actually performs”, she notes.³ There is something at least suspicious in such compulsive and generalized repetition of words, which, according to Imschoot, reveals a certain anxiety, a crisis in the notions themselves. This was expressed in 2004, almost ten years ago. In 2013 and in what seems to constitute an even more unmanageable burst of “collaboration” and its related terms, only within the last three weeks I received invitations for more than five conferences, festivals, discussions, publications, on the topic. One of these was even from myself, who is currently organizing together with some close collaborators “a bet on the potentiality of cooperation” including the coming together of a group of performance artists and theorists with the aim to create a book.⁴

“Do we speak more about collaboration because artists collaborate more than they used to, say, a decade ago?” Imschoot wonders.⁵ Do we speak *even* more today about collaboration, cooperation, collectivity, because *the more* artists kept speaking about them in this last decade (since Imschoot first asked the question) *the less* they ended up working together? Bojana Kunst has argued that the anxiety hidden behind the obsessive use of these words springs from the inability to really inflict change, to make the processes of collaboration part of *res publica* and to open up our political and transformative potentiality.⁶ And that is because, ultimately, we have no time for this. All this anxiety thus expresses exactly our attempt to look behind the mask of a determinate race, whereby, at the same time, we just won’t admit that the more we stress our resistance to that very race the more intensely we take part in it as years pass. Richard Sennett takes such thoughts even further. No matter how often we will use these terms, modern society and current modes of living and working not only don’t involve true collaboration but moreover they “de-skill” us from practicing it. As in the social realm people are losing the skills to deal with intractable differences succumbing totally to a cultural homogenization of taste; as material inequality isolates them; as short-term labour makes their social contacts more superficial and their commitment to a work environment always temporary, we are losing the skills of cooperation needed to make a complex society work, Sennett posits.⁷

Nevertheless, Kunst suggests that we can use the current excess of collaboration exactly as a reminder of the possibility of really achieving “genuine exchanges”, beyond the obsessive use of terms and as an antidote to this de-skilling taking place today. But how could one define “genuine exchange”? And, more importantly, how can we open our working together to unexpected paths of transformation, and approach the potential of collaboration indeed as an agent of change? When we detach this potential from its obsessive actualization, according to Kunst. The actualization of

³ Van Imschoot, Myriam and Le Roy, Xavier, “Letters in Collaboration”, *Maska*, no. 1-2, st. 84-85, 2004, p. 62.

⁴ The project *Syros – a bet on the potentiality of cooperation* will take place from 14th -22nd July in Syros, Greece as a gathering of performance artists and theorists from all over Europe with the aim to create a book publication that will focus more on the specific *topos* of the encounter instead of a specific, predetermined topic. The phrase “a bet on the potentiality of cooperation” is borrowed by Rudi Laermans’s recent talk “Being in Common: collaboration’s politics of the possible” presented in *Weaving Politics* Conference, 14-16 December 2012, Stockholm.

⁵ Van Imschoot and Le Roy, “Letters in Collaboration”, p. 62.

⁶ Kunst, Bojana, “Prognosis on Collaboration”, 2009, [Online] <<http://kunstbody.wordpress.com/2009/03/29/prognosis-on-collaboration/>>, [Accessed 18 March 2013].

⁷ Sennett, Richard, *Together – The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, p.9.

potential, though, has become a primary force of value in contemporary cultural, artistic and economic market, she continues. This exploitation of human potentiality today is deeply affecting the ways that we perceive and experience collaboration. The potential of collaborative processes will thus be revealed only once these are freed from the arrest of deadlines, speed, simultaneous connections, constant actualization and lack of time, Kunst posits. For one can become aware of one's potential to exist, create and spring forth from oneself only when this potential is *not* realized. Potentiality constitutes a *temporal* constellation, which is divided from the action itself, it is not translated into the action at all and comes to light only when not being actualized, realized, stabilized. It's time to come back to the question of time and its relation to collaboration in artistic processes, Kunst argues. If collaboration means working together, the nature of the encounter that enables our work together, i.e. the quality of its time, will be of crucial importance. And in order to open up the time in our collaborations, we have to take time out of the obsession with actual, stable, graspable and countable outcomes, and work together in a time constellation convenient enough to open a spatial potentiality for proximity. It is one such convenient time, open to the wide and unpredictable practice of working together, that is able to affect the way we move and work, evoke genuine exchanges, bring change and condition our future together.

Therefore, finding ourselves today in the rupture between the impossibility of the refusal of the collaborative processes, in which we are already implemented, and the possibility of genuine exchange and change, which has yet to happen, instead of keep repeating words we will have to suggest specific tools and temporalities that will reveal the unrealizable potential of our coming together, Kunst seems to suggest.⁸

Back to *Brouillon*. As soon as one is in space, she sees a big, long, white and quite messy gallery room. Works of art and human bodies are moving in it. From videos, installations, piles of books, ping pong tables and boxes full of photographs depicting moments of the history of dance to artists responding to these works and spectators seeing, listening and discussing, everything is on the move. At first, as is usually the case in galleries, one is most likely to go around and engage with the exhibited works. They are not that many in this case and given the fact that, as I recently heard somewhere, one takes an average time of two seconds to look at a visual artwork, after half an hour one could be more or less done. Somewhere on the way, though, you'll definitely get caught in *Brouillon*. Someone will read to you *Mladen Stilinović's Praise of Laziness*, or someone will invite you to go under a huge yellow cloth and experience together the work hidden under it, on your four, or you will become part of a human chain who looks at and then passes from hand to hand a series of photographs of past dances, and from mouth to mouth a series of words related to each of these images. In this frame you will also witness discussions as to whether, when doing these actions, you collaborate or are being instructed by the artists who initiated each idea. And you will look at the works again from different perspectives and in different ways. Then you may go out for a while to discuss a bit with a friend, have a tea, meet some of the artists outside "work" and even play ping-pong with them or listen to the music played live by one of

⁸ Kunst, "Prognosis on Collaboration", 2009.

them there. After a while you will go back in and get involved in other encounters. Through them you will look and re-look at the exhibited works, your body and others. It will not always be the case that you will choose which works you'll see or what encounter you'll have. Sometimes the work will come meet you. You will be resting for a while, sitting on the floor at a corner of the room, watching the bodies in the room moving, dancing, undressing in slow motion, discussing, seeing, working, and someone will suddenly turn a tv monitor the other way around until it meets your eyes. Or you will be discussing with a friend and someone will come say to you: "Would you like to come and do something with me? Cause I would like to be with more people for this". Or without realizing you will be part of a discussion about the notion of "good work" and the practices it involves. You will pass five hours in *Brouillon* moving between your individual space and that of others, entering and exiting that common space, engaging with diverse activities or quitting others, listening to the music coming from some of the works, discovering acts of artists that you had not noticed, seeing and re-seeing artworks that are projected on different walls or stand next to different works each time (and thus resonate totally different meanings). Endless drafts of relations, writings, dancings, readings, seeings, screamings, restings, speakings. What matters is not so much the specific artworks anymore, nor is the specific artists and spectators or their acts in space, as is what takes place in between all these and the drafts they create in the time that passes.

Paolo Virno posits that there are things that only exist inside relationships. He names the qualities involved in these things "general intellect", something that "exists or occurs in the borderline, between you and me, in the relation between you, him, me".⁹ This kind of intellect opposes the "universal" one, which strives to gather "people" as a mass of atoms under the unity of principals represented by the state and its machinery. To these "people", unity is a promise toward which they must move, according to Virno. In the place of one such unity that concludes, he suggests the unity of the "multitude" that precedes allowing differentiation and singularity.¹⁰ For Virno, the individual is a result of a movement from the general to the particular, and not a starting point. We are united at first place and from there we move towards singularization. It is this precedent unity that leads the way, which people therefore proceed from. That's something completely different than the unity of the state, which is a promise that people pursue, and which no one proceeds from. What thus matters in our collaborative encounters nowadays, Virno concludes, is finding the relation between the highest possible degree of communality or generality and the highest possible degree of singularity. Similarly, Alain Badiou urges us to protest against any conception that proposes the public as a unified community, substance, or consistent set. The public, he argues, represents humanity in its very inconsistency, in its infinite variety. The more it is presented as unified (socially, nationally, civically), the less useful this is for the complementation of any idea. Only a generic public, a chance public, is worth anything at all.¹¹

⁹ Lavaert, Sonja and Gielen, Pascal, "The Dismasure of Art – An Interview with Paolo Virno", in Gielen, Pascal and De Bruyne, Paul, Eds., *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009, p. 21.

¹⁰ Lavaert and Gielen, "The Dismasure of Art – An Interview with Paolo Virno", p. 34.

¹¹ Badiou, Alain, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005, p.72.

Post-fordist society though insists on the unified public (Virno's "universal intellect" of "people") as a source of financial gain and social collaboration. In one such society the task to improve collaboration is included in our job. We have to instigate collaboration at work and there has to be some degree of freedom and autonomy in that, so that it can create concrete products that will then be exploited. Finding ourselves in collaborative modes that are being appropriated in this way from the side of the state, what becomes a central concern, especially in relation to arts, is for Virno: "what aesthetic experiences we can develop to transfer from the universal to the general without consequently destroying the particular".¹² It becomes obvious that, at a time when labour has become foremost linguistic and communicative and workers acquire their skills mainly outside the workspace by living in a big city, gaining aesthetic experiences and creating networks, to develop such experiences and forms of resistance concerns so many aspects and vital dimensions that it eventually means inventing new institutions, he posits.

How we invent new institutions thus constitutes for Virno the big question on the European political scene today. And since older forms of resistance, like the strike, no longer work, we need new forms that are much more linguistic and creative, he argues. The most important effect of art, therefore, is set exactly in the formal sphere, in a formal investigation that will produce criteria and units of measure for the creation of these new institutions. What we need for these new institutions, according to Virno, is not the abandonment of all rules. There are rules and one ought to abide by those rules, because the innovative moment occurs precisely when we feel forced to apply rules, yet do so in a way that leaves set standards, as he notes. Each rule though should be considered as something that needs regular adjustment and verification. We are thus in need of a "galaxy of foundations, a network of institutes, a dissemination of decision-making locations", which will create autonomous positions for intelligence and communication, providing a flexibility able to transform rules, construct new rules and reduce old rules to a factual state.¹³ The exceptional situation is, for Virno, the result of a creative process where we find ourselves in the no-man's-land of that which exists no more and that which does not yet exist. The old rules no longer work, but there are no new rules yet, and the old rules no longer work because they've been applied innovatively, which has caused confusion. Our new institutions will have to draw on such forms in order to combine existing elements differently and introduce new original ones, while of course also leaving space for the third option: to exit them and go look for another constitution. And it is always specific experiments and suggestions that help us explore the potential of these new institutions by transforming productive collaboration into political collaboration, Virno concludes.

I would argue that *Brouillon*, and more broadly Boris Charmatz's idea for the creation of a museum of dance (*Musée de la Danse*), constitutes exactly one such experiment for the exploration of new forms and institutions. It provides, as Virno describes, flexible structures that move between older and newer rules of what a gallery and an exhibition are or can be, what constitutes a dance and

¹² Lavaert and Gielen, "The Dismasure of Art – An Interview with Paolo Virno", p. 21.

¹³ Lavaert and Gielen, "The Dismasure of Art – An Interview with Paolo Virno", p. 39.

how it could be perceived in different contexts, the way we look at artworks and dances and the way we experience time when doing this. And it combines such distinct elements in different ways, while also allowing space for an exit to a new space or the return to a previous one. Noémie Solomon notes that since 2009, when Charmatz took over the *Centre national choréographique de Rennes et de Bretagne* as its artistic director and renamed it into *Musée de la Danse*, the aim has been exactly for a formal investigation into the potentiality of institutions without a “centre”, a widely used term especially in dance contexts to point to the necessary (and often imposed) interiorized balance and stability that the dancing body needs to maintain. Re-moving the “centre” from the institution’s name, can thus also be seen as a gesture towards moving away from stabilized notions of dance in order to explore a more flexible, unpredictable and thus open to potentiality “variety of points, lines and curves from and through which movement can pass”.¹⁴ And the ideal space for one such exploration is for Charmatz the space of the museum and gallery, which accumulate time indefinitely displaying cultural modes of organizing art and knowledge. Drawing on these characteristics, Charmatz and his collaborators enter the gallery space of *Argos* in Brussels in order to take time and create fugitive performances that expose movements between art and bodies, weave together the place, the project, the audience and the artists, and explore new functions for moving and spectating bodies across the contemporary scene. Experimenting with the ways in which we can “sketch” new temporalities, thus, *Brouillon* enacts the possibility for multiple, contesting relations between things, bodies and the ways in which they relate to visibility and legibility, as Solomon puts it, outlining new grounds for institutions able to transform productive collaboration into political collaboration and pass from the universal of the state to the general of the multitude, without destroying the particular, to return to Virno.

Rudi Laermans argues that today the utopian longing for a united “we” marked by a harmonious togetherness, which informed 1960s’s avant-gardism, no longer predominates. We have now passed from that “highly romantic rhetoric of “moving together freely” to an ethic of “doing a project *with* others”.¹⁵ Conceiving our encounters as the meetings of “an ensemble of productive singularities set to work, and as such productive”, our aim should be to join forces without caring to predict the eventful outcomes of this process or be sure about the evolving qualities of our mutual working relationships.¹⁶ *Despite* the qualities of unpredictability and insecurity involved in such encounters though, or rather *because of* these qualities, which according to Kunst are the ones that open up to potentiality, we should work on these encounters motivated by a certain hope. This hope has nothing to do with a future framed by more substantial, actualized ideas for an “emancipated sociality” going beyond constraints; on the contrary, as Laermans puts it, this hope “bets on potentialities of cooperation itself” to create artistic practices structured and focused in time, able to produce specific tools and insightful propositions with regard to alternative production and curation models, as well as the way we can meet, work and move with

¹⁴ Solomon, Noémie, “Choreographies of the outside: on Boris Charmatz’s Musée de la danse”, *Maska* 149-150, autumn ’12, p. 105.

¹⁵ Laermans, Rudi, “Being in Common: collaboration’s politics of the possible”, in “Weaving Politics” Conference, 14-16, December 2012, Stockholm. [Online] <<http://www.weavingpolitics.se/video-day-one/>> [Accessed 18 March 2013].

¹⁶ The quote belongs to: Negri, Antonio, *Empire and Beyond*, Trans. Ed Emery, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p.12.

others today. It is exactly one such “bet” that *Brouillon* wins by constructing an experience of time through and as movement that makes true for a while the dream of institutions open to the creative combinations of older and newer elements and rules, where the limits between work and play are continuously negotiated, where one can enter and exit, encounter artworks and others, move towards them or enjoy her individual space, for a long time, in sketches of restless movements; the dream of a social realm as “brouillon”.

Let me add that none of the “co-“ terms was mentioned in any of the information accompanying the project nor was it heard at any point in the space where we “stayed for a long time” with others, moving, creating drafts of new forms and institutions; only “the aim to invent a new type of public space for and via dance”.¹⁷

Source literature:

Badiou, Alain, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Gielen, Pascal and De Bruyne, Paul, Eds., *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009.

Kunst, Bojana, “Prognosis on collaboration”, 2009, [Online] <<http://kunstbody.wordpress.com/2009/03/29/prognosis-on-collaboration/>>, [Accessed 18 March 2013].

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Solomon, Noémie. “Choreographies of the outside: on Boris Charmatz’s Musée de la danse”. *Maska* 149-150, autumn ’12, pp. 104-111.

Short bio: Danae Theodoridou is a performance artist and researcher, currently based in Brussels. She has recently completed her PhD at Roehampton University in London, she teaches in various University Departments, and presents her research and artistic work in different contexts in Europe.

Keywords: Brouillon, Musée de la Danse, Charmatz, dance, cooperation, potentiality, institution

Abstract: This article examines *Brouillon – an exhibition in motion (Musée de la danse)* as an experiment on the innovative forms that our “new institutions” could have according to Paolo

¹⁷ The phrase is taken from the publicity material of the project. See: <<http://www.kaaitheater.be/en/e1126/brouillon/>>

Virno. It argues that through its “sketches” of movement and the spatial and temporal qualities involved in them, *Brouillon* (“draft”, “sketch” in English) constructed forms that remained constantly unfinished, open and on the move, while registering a pass from the utopian togetherness of the united “we” that “moves together freely” of the ’60s, to today’s ethics of “doing a project *with* others”. It is exactly this shift and the cooperative working modes produced in its frame that Rudi Laermans has described, as a “bet on the potentialities of cooperation itself”. This “bet”, the specific tools it produces and the way these are used in the frame of contemporary art encounters, are discussed here as contemporary dance’s insightful propositions regarding alternative production and curation models, and the way we can meet, work and move with others today.