

BOJANA CVEJIĆ

— Bojana Cvejić: The book I recently published, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in Contemporary European Dance and Performance* (Palgrave, 2015), proposes that dance is capable of thought. This kind of thought is thoroughly different from representational thinking, which, since Kant, has been based on concepts of understanding. Instead of understanding and recognition, thought arises in expression, a path of experimentation in which a problem is created, posed and solved. For dance, this means that the problems must relate to the body, movement and time, even if no motion or living form of movement is perceptible—body and movement being historical residues of the discipline.

My inquiry includes works made between 1998 and 2008, which critics have referred to as “conceptual dance,” a derogatory misnomer for threatening to eliminate the dancing body: a selection of choreographies by Xavier Le Roy, Eszter Salamon, Mette Ingvartsen, Jonathan Burrows and others. Of course, the comparison with conceptual art was inadequate, because bodies and movements abounded in these works of dance. The problem lies elsewhere: these choreographies show that the source for dance could be outside the self, dissociated from the body that acts as an index of subjective expression or as an instrument of the form of dance. Their point of departure is somewhere else: in expressing problems that disrupt and denaturalize the bond between movement and body. There is some philosophy to explain how problems are posed, from Spinoza, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, I’m skipping here...

— Christina Schmid: You write in such a rich intellectual framework that I am hard pressed right now to decide which strand to follow first. But here is one thought: when you talk about thought and dance and the articulation of problems through dance but not in the vein of conceptual art, you put thought and dance in dialogue, into an ultimately very intimate relationship. Is the problem articulated and then explored, or is the

problem actually something that emerges from the process? I am interested in the temporality here.

— Cvejić: Problem is immanent to the process of creation: its posing is its resolution at the same time. Here is an example:

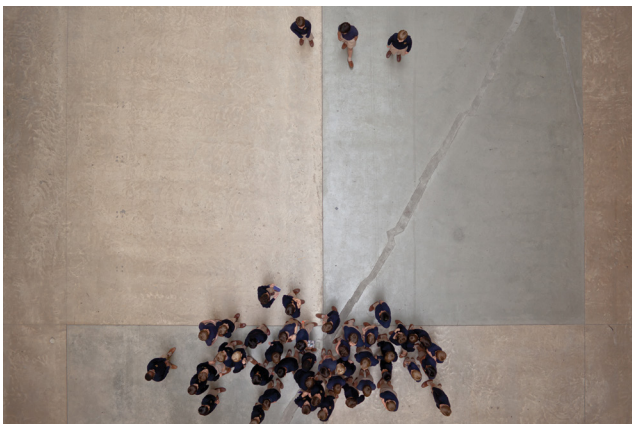
When Salamon searched for invisible movement in her piece *Nvsbl* (2006), she didn’t have an image of what it would look like. Thinking through that impossibility, she came to the idea that the source of movement should be hidden, and therefore, the nature of that motion would become opaque. Part of it was also a gender-politically motivated quest of de-objectifying female bodies. Four women are moving in an imperceptible manner from the outskirts of the stage toward the middle. I, a spectator, can’t discern change or displacement from point A to point B. I have to look away and return with my gaze in order to be able to register a change as if it was a hallucination. The scale is so minute that I cannot perceive change as it occurs.

The problem consisted of finding a way to invent imperceptible motion without slowing down habitual movement. Deceleration is practical, leaning on a habit: if I decelerate my movement of taking this glass of water, it will only appear as a possibility already known, a movement a bit slower than usual, slower than what you expect me to do. But how to produce the duration of the bodies? Not to calculate time for traversing a distance, it is a question of duration rather than computation... The problem had to be navigated in a different way. Salamon understood that she had to apply a technique that would affirm slowness as a quality rather than as a lack of speed. The solution was practical: the dancers were to substitute the internal space of their bodies for the external space of the stage. For this they applied “body-mind centering,” a bodily system based on pseudo-physiological knowledge and imagination that we could issue movement from those body parts that we don’t have sensation and



awareness of. For example, issuing movement from the sensation of liver or lymph... sounds New Agey, but the point is that it keeps the dancers busy imagining something they have no image of instead of feeling inhibited and restricted by slowness. And it eliminates the unit of measure of movement. Another constraint was to orient movement into past. Dancers, and performers in general, are trained in the time of imminent future, a present made up of instants constantly moving forward. Salamon asked them to look behind, to put their focus into the trace they leave behind. "Can I look into the past of my movement?" More constraints were used to complicate and render the motion hallucinatory, for instance, adding the remembrance of states of being moved in situations diametrically opposite to the state they find themselves in. All remained invisible techniques. They don't exist only in the minds of dancers, but manifest in shaping their being on stage, delineating a region of conditions and terms in which to move. That would be an example of choreographing a problem.

— Schmid: Are you familiar with José Esteban Muñoz's writing on the hermeneutics of residue? He uses the concept as a way to talk about alternative means of telling history, for instance, of the gay community through movement and dance: what lives on in the bodies of the audience after a really amazing drag show has ended? What remains and helps forge community through ephemeral gestures and sensations? It seems that when



you talk about the role of duration and temporality, about probing the problem through lived experience, which is a very phenomenological approach to the problem, there is another activation of that hermeneutics of residue involved, that tracing of sensation.

The other thing that struck me when you were talking is starting with questions: what would it feel like to move from the liver? From the lymph? This very speculative approach, just asking what if, is intriguing: even though we intellectually know there is no way I can feel the liver, the feigning, pretending I could, is such a poetic way of posing the problem through imagining such impossible movement. Reading your work, I couldn't help but notice how elegantly you walk that line between, on the one hand, being very aware of the potential of such poetic problem-posing and, on the other, how there is always the translation into the political, even now as you were talking.

For instance, when you talked about how part of Eszter Salamon's project was an attempt to de-objectify the female body, that's one of the very clearly political moments in your thinking about the work. But there is another political moment I wanted to ask you about, a moment you emphasized a couple of times: the source for this movement is not the expression of an inner self. Right? It seems you are so interested in moving beyond this fallacy of thinking that art has to be deeply expressive, that self-expression is inevitably the goal. I found that very refreshing. Because working with art students, of course, I am confronted with that urge to self-express all the time. And the therapeutic value of self-expression is a matter of course: yes, doubtless, that's there. But is that really what can sustain attention, interest and study, if art is just self-expression? So I am hoping you could elaborate on where you see the pitfalls of that equation of art and self-expression, and why?

And if I may add on one more question, I would like you to address that question both from your perspective as an academic, theoretical writer and as a dance maker, as in *Spatial Confessions* (2015), which was discussed in one of your essays. You've also held the role of critic, dramaturge, sounding board and all kinds of in-between roles. It seems that the problem of expression arises in all of these different arenas and takes on different shades.

— Cvejić: *Spatial Confessions* is an instance of both things you ask: avoidance of self-expression and a work that is indifferent to being qualified as art or something else. It resulted from an invitation by the curator

Catherine Wood that I didn't understand at the time: could I "manifest" the book I co-wrote with Ana Vujanović *Public Sphere by Performance* (b_books, 2012) in the vast space of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall? My response was to use choreography as an instrument of inquiry, of a survey of the population of visitors entering Tate Modern to be expressed in spatial ornaments. We posed questions to visitors about their status and views on citizenship, work, money, living in London, Tate Modern, etc. but didn't ask them about art. Their answers were filtered through positions, movements and gestures that re-ordered the creatively chaotic playground of Turbine Hall.

I've worked extensively in performing arts, from directing opera in experimental set-ups to writing and performing texts in theater, or collaborating with choreographers. At the same time, I studied musicology, aesthetics and finally philosophy from which I got my PhD. The question of becoming an artist has never arisen for me. Writing was clearly my preference, and text also my medium. Refusing to position myself as an artist, I was recognized as theoretician, dramaturge, collaborator, etc.

— Schmid: But that's being hailed as, placed as, rather than claiming that role..?

— Cvejić: Having moved to the West from Eastern Europe, I learned that no one is allowed to sit on too many chairs. If one dares to express herself critically in the public, then she has immediately lost the credibility of the artist. To qualify as an artist in a strong sense, you have to have the traditional genius-like idiocy, *je ne sais pas quoi*, you don't know where it all comes from—I'm deliberately exaggerating here. The attitude that prevails in performing arts, at least, is very different from the times of conceptualism when the artist didn't only assume responsibility for meanings created by the work, but also was the first and last interpreter of their work. Nowadays, artists take the stance of open work in a lucrative sense: the more meanings drawn from or projected into the work, the greater its value.

The book and films I collaborated on with Ana Vujanović and Marta Popivoda (*Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*, 2013)—both exist in the art world and in the contexts of informal self-organized education. Whether they should be approached as art or theory is less important than their thought or the political ideas underlying it, or the fact they result from the common platform TkH (Walking Theory), the collective I've been a co-founding member of since 2000.

To come back to your question, what worries me and



hence, has become part of the subject I'm currently investigating is a new brand of intensive individualism, equally dominating the arts and many other domains of social life in capitalism. After single authorship and a strong concept of subject and self were contested in the 1960–70s in the name of collectivity, the split subject, the theses on "death of the author" (Roland Barthes) and "end of subject" (Michel Foucault), we are now witness to its return in a reinforced aesthetic guise. The market orientation of the arts is partly responsible for it: single artists are branded and commoditized today, especially in performing arts; their presence ("the artist is present"), rather than their work, is being circulated. One way to describe the materialist conditions under current capitalism is anti-production. Institutions and public money for production are disappearing and giving way and traction to venues of the art world that circulate reproduction. Curating often takes the aim of managing audience's experience and reception of already made, validated and then recycled or revamped work. The current second performance turn in visual art consists of accommodating and adapting already existing works of dance and performance for the purpose of enhancing audience participation. This is part of a larger condition of total aestheticization of consumer-capitalist life, where art is a potent instrument.

Aesthetic individualism is one of the modes of "performing the self" I am currently researching with Ana



Vujanović. It is the continuation of the investigation of the public sphere; while in the first phase, the point of departure was the crisis of the public, here we start from the crisis of the social by large, which manifests through a prevalent individualist understanding of the self, and its aesthetic self-performances. Art plays a prominent role here as a source of aesthetic, mostly bodily techniques of the practice of the self, or in modes of performing an entrepreneurial, self-affected and self-expressive, desubjectivized selves. For instance, I observe how a solo format in dance and performance is the matrix for performing project-based work in high-end knowledge work, extreme sports, and the entertainment industry. What is aesthetic about this new brand of individualism, distinguished from the earlier possessive and liberal variants, is the emphasis on “how” rather than “what,” on intensity, on ability or potentiality to self-realise, on the sensorial, affective and even somatic dimensions of being. The questions that Ana and I are pursuing are: how is it that the self is a matter of performance? Performance, in which sense? What does performing mean other than the well-founded theory of the performative construction of identity (Judith Butler)?

— Schmid: Yes, let's talk more about this pervasive performance culture, which has been written about in various ways. I was intrigued by the way you connect externally mandated performance, as in the freelance economy, which Jan Verwoert discusses in "Exhaustion and Exuberance." As cultural workers we go wherever we are invited to perform and do our talk here and our thing there. This is also an internal performance in the sense that you are performing this self for yourself. Perhaps the selfie phenomenon is shorthand for this constant aestheticization of the self, which is connected to the quest for a certain intensity of experience, which you talk about in your writing. Let's elaborate on that.

— Cvejić: The difference I am proposing in the notion of performance, is that it is not understood as an act, but rather a process with an indefinite horizon. It is much closer to the industrial capitalist connotation of performance-quality, as in the German word *Leistung* (achievement). The Korean-German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, rephrases the shift from disciplinary to—not control, but—“achievement-society,” as achievement becomes the ethical norm, in the sense of ethics as how to live the best one can. Achievement stands for competence, but even more for ability, potentiality, as it defines what's being traded in living labor today. The worst predicament a candidate could have is not to be judged as bad at something, but as having no potential. This corresponds to the speculative and immaterial dimensions of capitalist production today.

To perform oneself means to relate to oneself in terms of potential without measure. The indefiniteness

corresponds to the aesthetic idea of infinity. It is to perform performability—the ability to appear, produce, live and experience more intensely than before. A reason for this is, what I tentatively call, a negative ontology: a sense of lack, a negative departure, uncertainty from which one needs to earn, and produce evidence of, one's achievement. This results in an intensive pace of work, where the reward is not the measure of investment, because one doesn't work to live. The slogan of the ethics of business management is “live to work.” In work, as in many other aspects of our social lives, the central project is the self, how one develops and what one produces is only an instrument or byproduct of the project of the self. The freelance lifestyle of the artist becomes the role model in other sectors: how to experiment, deal with risk, be flexible, and most of all, tap into sensorial and affective competences to shape experiences. Capitalism is entering an aesthetic age in which the sensual logic of the experience economy rules. Artists are deemed to be good at that.

When it comes to experience and aestheticizing one's own life as if it were a work of art, the era of experimenting with oneself, as in the 1960s–70s, is bygone. The experiences that the late Foucault or Leo Bersani endorsed were limit-experiences, including not only a danger, but a goal of self-dissipation, overcoming a strong sense of self. Now the value is in accumulating the capital of experiences, calculated and normativized, so that they enrich one's sense of self.

The dark side of individualism is the crisis of the social. Privatization of one's social life, competition of self-performances, of entrepreneurs, little capitalists of themselves, overlooks the greater power of cooperation, the social relations thanks to which we produce, which could be turned into a stronger political ground of the common. Individuals that are self-absorbed fail to understand that both as particulars and as species they are losing in the long-run, they come out depleted and consumed by capitalism.

— Schmid: Have you come across Lane Relyea and his recent book *Your Everyday Art World* (MIT Press, 2013)? One of his arguments involves tracing the punk-inspired, underground DIY ethos of the 1980s in this country to the entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberalism. In this transformation, the artist as the stereotypical romantic model of the DIY agent, just making enough to get by, has become the poster child for the precariat under neoliberalism. Now we're all expendable, expected to perform a mixture of initiative and entrepreneurship, complete with perfect management of affect. So I see a lot of affinities between your ideas here and his.

But what I had not heard before is your connection of what happens after capitalism became speculative in 1971



with the cancellation of the Bretton Woods Agreement to subject formation. What does it mean when speculative capitalism becomes internalized, when what you are speculating on is an inner potential to achieve that might translate into capital where actualization is not necessary? That translation is fascinating.

— Cvejić: Yes, you are totally spot on in thinking how the removal of the gold standard is correlated with subject formation. It consists of internalizing competition with oneself.

— Schmid: The odd thing is how successful that internalization is: we are using economic principles and economic theories to make sense of who we are. And that is the insidiousness of that sort of individualism.

— Cvejić: Yes, totally.

— Schmid: So, let's take another step. In your research you've identified the toxic qualities to this formation of self, whether they manifest in autoimmune diseases or the erosion of a shared social sphere and a shared social imaginary. You then make a few alternative suggestions on how to move forward and that is no easy feat. As Miranda Joseph has argued in *Against the Romance of Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), far from being the warm and fuzzy other to cold capitalism, community is deeply imbricated in capitalism and has been completely commodified. I think she even suggests that community and capitalism are mutually constitutive ideas. So it's interesting to try to think about how to recuperate a shared social imaginary and to realize that the tools we have are also already compromised by this pervasive economic logic of capitalism. So how are we to move forward? And I hope we can address this question both in terms of where and how art can play a role in figuring a way out of the crisis of a shared social imaginary and also in terms of how else individuation could look like. How might we understand the formation of self differently?

— Cvejić: When we were working on our last book, Ana and I insisted on relating the public sphere with society, rather than community. Communities, the way they are lived and practised today, are identitarian and more or less exclusive. Society belongs to everyone, and should be more inclusive than a citizenship that miscounts people with respect to nationhood and other kinds of privilege. Unfortunately, collectivity has been condemned for its negative image of totalitarian ideology and charismatic leadership. But collectivity deserves to be revisited on something other than ideological ground. I've opted to regard it as a mode of individuation, where individuation equates coming to be, existence, and differentiation.

Individuation prioritizes a process, in which the individual is only a passing stage: the process is open-ended

and based on reciprocal relations between the individual and milieu (a French pun signifying environment and middle), the heterogeneous middle of all levels of being, from minerals, plants, animals to humans. I'm leaning here on a French, somewhat obscure philosopher, Gilbert Simondon, who proposed a systematic ontology that short circuits two distinct phases. The pre-individual is for Simondon the unlimited nature (apeiron), the being saturated with potentials before it starts to individuate. In a Marxian historical, materialist perspective, in the reading of Paolo Virno, the pre-individual is the common historico-natural heritage of the human species, "species-being" (Gattungswesen in early Marx), or what we are born into: language, habits as sensorial capacities and the modes of production. The heritage is the product of many, an implicit and given cooperation and sharing of individuals. Because we all have a capacity to learn language and make it our own. We individuate the pre-individual common, but never exhaust it. What we produce together is what individuates us beyond our individual limits, it is the transindividual, or the collective mode of individuation.

What happens in capitalism is that we don't have the control over the conditions of our collaboration and sharing, we are alienated from that potential to operate together as this would entail another distribution of wealth and power. This is why the many-sidedness of our generic being can't fully develop individuality. According to Virno, if transindividuality is true, the political goal would be to make it the case. One of the few proposals that he makes is the general basic income, because, in Virno's view, it would be an interim solution to destitution. It would allow people a basic security from which they would have more time to organize themselves politically, to act in solidarity.

I have many reservations about the arts, setting the model of transindividuality through collaboration, or when we expect from art to provide political solutions or become instrumental in political activism. Oftentimes, when artists attempt to pose political problems, they manage to represent them, and not solve them. But what can happen in the arts is that relations between people can be reconfigured and rehearsed aesthetically against society. We can rehearse another social order, other roles that we don't play in everyday life that can help us imagine another society.

Hereby an example, the work is called *Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine* by Mette Edvardsen (2010). A number of people have learned a book by heart. As a recipient (spectator in the theatrical sense) of this work, I choose the book I'd like to read as if I pick it up from a shelf in a library. For a half an hour, the living book recites itself to me. There are many mind-blowing things about this quiet, unspectacular piece. One of them is that,





against the habit of receiving portions of fiction through video, I am listening to a book in a public space.

— Schmid: There is such an interesting temporality to not reading a text but listening to it. You have to let it flow, you cannot hold on.

— Cvejić: Right. You surrender to the other person, the living book. This requires your trust, appreciation of the effort of the other, and support of her when she stumbles.

— Schmid: Sometimes the speakers improvise, correct? Based on what they remember of the story.

— Cvejić: Yes. This work of art doesn't tell us how society should be. It revives a practice that is in decline, reading books and memorizing them. In this age of deskilling, the question arises, what shall we put our effort in learning? It's very important that the living books are not actors, they are people coming from various professions. It is they who propose the book they will learn by heart, so it is a true collaboration between Edvardson who initiated the project (and is one of the living books) and others.

— Schmid: And there's the whole architecture of memory. How do you go about memorizing a book? Not entrusting it to an electronic device but to your brain.

— Cvejić: Indeed. And also, as you said, temporality. It's a slow and effortful process for the person to learn, but also to listen, and to maybe come back and listen further.

— Schmid: It heightens the accusation that "art doesn't make sense," since you could just listen to the audiobook. Yet there is an interpersonal piece, the awkwardness of surrendering to the stumble, the stutter, that makes it completely different.

I totally hear you about not wanting to burden art with the responsibility of these quasi-solutions and policy predictions but instead having that poetic gap. There's a kind of freedom that entails. But there's also space for ambivalence, isn't there?

I found myself reading your four arguments in favor of a poetics and had to think of Ernst Bloch and the anticipatory illumination that he attributes to art. That it's not like art will tell us what to do, because that would defeat the process, but that there is this sense of identifying in the present what's missing in the here and now.

— Cvejić: Feeling often disenchanted with the arts, I often think we could also practice prefigurative criticism, in the sense that we don't need to criticize the work that already exists but we can call for works that don't exist yet. But it sounds arrogant, of course, because, who am

I to say what should come?

— Schmid: But it's a wish, right? Who can argue with a wish? I still want to talk about the suggestion you made in one of your essays: what if we asked of each artwork, what does the world look like after this? If each work of art was a proposal? I found that question or proposal compelling, especially now, in connection to your wish piece. In the essay you wrote with Ana about the crisis of a shared social imaginary, you diagnose different factors that have contributed to this crisis. The "misery of individualism" was one of them, digitality was another. It's no longer ideas that we base decisions on but algorithms, numbers, polls...

— Cvejić: And procedures.

— Schmid: Right. Then there was the ubiquitous presentism, paired with an insistence on the autobiographical. I don't know how this is in Europe—but here, in this arena of cultural production, the autobiographical comes with so much weight. The operative assumption is, of course, that no one can argue with the intimate telling of your story. So it's presentism plus intimism: an insistence on saying, "this is irrefutable, this is my experience, and I am expressing and representing it this way." So art becomes this unarguable thing that proposes only the authority and authorship of the individual. So we're back in yet another pitfall in the emphasis on individualism, it seems.

— Cvejić: Right. Ontologizing one's own experience comes as a truth game. The evidence of the real is felt within your body, the self coinciding with the lived affective experience. This operation of subjectivation through the index of one's bodily experience we have inherited from American modern dance. It's best captured in Martha Graham's famous dictum: the body says what words cannot.

Something has gone awry about "the personal is political" the moment that personalization (customization, choice by preferences) has come to shape how we are addressed, asked to participate, express ourselves, consume.... Algorithms translate our personal choices into indexical identities, so that the images of ourselves strike back at us tempting us to coincide with ourselves, which, inasmuch as it is impossible, it is also dangerous. What is peculiar about the status of art in Western society is that artists' subjectivity is regarded more valuable than any other to the point that a lot of performance culture is preoccupied with it. All the while, it seems to me, what is more interesting and productive is what exceeds the self, what people can make together, or processes of collective individuation in which not only an individual but a heterogeneous set of relations must change. This is happening in the current social movements in South



Europe, the solidarity movement in Greece, municipalism in Spain. There is something to learn about the logic of this process. From the event that causes an affective reaction—indignation, similar to what I found to be the best slogan in the Women’s March against Trump, “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention”—the next step is to rationalize the emotions that brought us together and self-organize. The moment could also be described as transcending the personal feeling of injustice and victimhood that gives weight to the autobiographical, as you said. So, “I am my story” doesn’t seem any longer to be a politically useful subject position.

— Schmid: But I think it goes back to what you said earlier that under capitalism the artist has become the commodity; it is no longer the work. It is the artist that has become the guarantor of value, so perhaps that’s why the autobiographical is just another piece of that. In that opportunity, which persists in this exchange with other people in the arts, in the exercise of wishful thinking, there is the potential that cannot be named yet because it still is only a potential. But there is that potential to affect the whole through reworking the relations within it. That relational piece, I think, might exceed the commodity. What’s difficult for me sometimes in thinking and reading about possible gestures of resistance that neoliberal capitalism still affords us, is that so often they are utterly self-defeating. Not only entangled with that formation of self we talked about, but also invoking *Bartleby* as a kind of poetic predecessor, Melville’s character, whose mantra is “I’d prefer not to.” And yet, as we know, the story does not end well for *Bartleby*. Likewise, the impulse of redefining exploitation as an embrace of radical generosity, embracing excess—that, too, is ultimately a self-defeating measure. So it’s interesting to think about the transindividual, how those relational, interactive, reciprocal moments might actually work against these dead ends as a different kind of resistance, to individualism and capitalism alike. Maybe that’s wishful thinking. And maybe that’s where we should end this conversation?

— Cvejić: Yes.