



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

CRISIS AND THE EMOTIONAL BODY: TOWARDS (ANOTHER) FREEDOM

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In his theorisation of the relationship between poetry and finance, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi discusses Europe's recent and current social crisis as a phenomenon which is not 'only economic and financial' but also, and more significantly, 'a crisis of imagination about the future' (Berardi 2012, 8). Such an irreversible crisis, the 'European collapse' of the last decade, as Berardi posits, is the product of the automatised, financialisation, and virtualisation of the economy which, by rendering the production of capital immaterial, has interrupted the 'relation between time and value', sign and thing, and has led to the 'floating values' of 'semio-capitalism' (86). The deregulation of signifying processes, and the deactivation of the affective sphere that has resulted, have irremediably compromised social autonomy. Taking forward the conceptualisations of the interconnection of language, economy, and politics formulated, among others, by the Italian post-workerist¹ authors Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi, and Maurizio Lazzarato, Berardi theorises the role played by poetry and the sensuous body in rediscovering the relationship between language and desire and reopening the possibility of social freedom.

In his discussion of how 'poetry may start the process of reactivating the emotional body, and therefore of reactivating social solidarity' (20), the Italian thinker pursues Félix Guattari's ([1992] 1995; [1979] 2011) reflections on the correlation between singular refrain and universal chaos in the reinvention of subjectivity and conceptualises rhythm as a poetic feature which can contribute to restoring our ability to conjoin with other singularities and with our social and cosmic environment. For Guattari (and Gilles Deleuze) the refrain functions to keep chaos at bay; as they write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the refrain is a 'territorial assemblage' with an intrinsic connection to

a 'home', a 'land': bird songs, traditional rhythms, a child singing in the night to appease the fear of the dark are illustrative examples (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 343–344). The refrain 'always carries earth with it' (344); it is a *ritournelle* that 'seeks to regain control of events that deterritorialized too quickly [...] and that started to proliferate on the side of the cosmos and the Imaginary' (Guattari [1979] 2011, 107).

In this article, I consider how a close engagement with rhythmical, repetitive, and cyclical performative practices in examples of recent European choreography may offer ways of responding to today's crisis of social cohesion, reimagining channels of intensive communication. In particular, I look at works by the Italian artist Alessandro Sciarroni (*Folk-s, will you still love me tomorrow?*, 2012 and *Chroma_don't be frightened of turning the page*, 2017) and by the London-based duo Igor and Moreno (*Idiot-Syncrasy*, 2013) and discuss how, in revisiting elements of folk traditions, they mobilise their potential as semantic and affective modalities. I suggest that these movement-based pieces, by embracing and intensifying the physical experience of repetition, reawaken the emotional body and work towards establishing a continuousness of relations in time and space and between individual singularities. Invoking Bojana Kunst's critical and theoretical exploration of the relationship of art and performance practice with capitalism, I observe these dances within the context of Western post-industrial society, founded on the erosion of boundaries between labour and non-labour, between work and free time. Kunst considers how the loss of this distinction has, in turn, transformed what were once understood as forms of freedom into controlled conditions upon which productivity is based: flexibility, mobility, speed, spontaneity, and creativity have become the instruments of subjugation of the contemporary subject. Qualities traditionally associated with artistic activity and experimentation have become essential attributes of labour. Examined from this perspective, post-industrial and neoliberal economies are seen as based on a form of 'exploitation of everyday movement' that relies on the 'appropriation' and 'exhaustion' of generic human faculties (Kunst 2015, 113).

In dialogue with post-Marxist thought and, in particular, with Virno's political philosophy, recent performance research has critically interrogated the relationship between labour and performance, offering 'a reflection upon the social and economic dimensions of performance as one of the important production forces of today' (Klein and Kunst 2012, 2). In parallel with Kunst, Randy Martin and André Lepecki have discussed how dance, while caught in capital's structures and flows, can also resist, complicate and suffuse them. Martin (2012, 68) depicts dancers as 'the ideal laborers in an idealized creative economy': despite their precarious economic conditions and vulnerable social status, 'dancers are valued for their creativity, flexibility, absence of material needs—they can make work in spare rooms with nothing more than their bodies, often unshod, subsist on few calories, and even among performing artists deliver more for less by garnering the most meagre wages'. Imbricated as it is in the movements and routines of politics and finance, dance—with its understanding of arrangements, relationships, and partnerships of bodies in time and space—is well-positioned to develop a critical response to the 'neoliberal *idealization* of creative work', to reject and propose alternatives to the exploitative mechanisms of today's economy (Lepecki 2016, 17).

Although crisis may appear to be 'endemic to capitalism' (Martin 2010, 361), an understanding of today's crisis ought to engage with the specific conjunctures of the present socio-political moment. In this respect, Martin's rethinking of Marxist political economy invites us to consider today's crisis as 'a crisis of knowledge in an economy based on making it serviceable' (Martin 2015, 4): whether the limits of knowledge lie in how it is (over)produced, organised or applied, today knowledge is 'unable to master its environment' (Martin 2010, 361). Insofar as knowing is entangled with other aspects of being, both public and private, a crisis of knowledge implicates affects, bodies, movement, of both collectivities and individuals. Martin's project throughout his academic oeuvre has been that of employing dance as a privileged 'analytic lens to engage the inner movement of politics' (Martin 2015, 5). He has argued that '[f]oregrounding the analytics of movement so redolent in dance can make for a richer evaluation of what is generated through political mobilization' (Martin 2012, 66).

Following Martin and other dance and performance theorists, I uphold the view that movement is 'intrinsically political' (Kunst 2015, 102; see also e.g. Lepecki 2006 and 2016; Burt 2017), and that the ways in which movement articulates and evaluates the relationship between the subject and the world at any given historical time has the potential to reveal the problematic aspects of that relationship and help us discern an alternative perspective. My contribution attempts to understand how contemporary dance is mobilised to engage with the current socio-political crisis by examining how recent choreographic practice by European artists invites us to confront the present impasse and co-imagine another outcome. This article does so by establishing a thread between the orchestration of dancing bodies in these dance works and Berardi's analysis of the embodied effects of the recent financial crisis, which speak of 'the subjugation of the biopolitical sphere of affection and language to financial capitalism' (Berardi 2012, 13). Berardi's discussion of the 'emotional body', while gesturing to the pre-subjective notion of affect (traceable to the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Deleuze and Guattari) and to the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences, accounts also for the semiotic processes of signifying subjects. With its focus on language and poetry, it combines an appreciation for the sensuous qualities of enunciation with an attention for the formal and structural aspects of modes of expression.

If my argument is prefigured by Kunst's and Martin's conceptualisations of the 'work' of performance, and of contemporary movement artists as exemplary labour force, it funnels these reflections towards an interrogation of dance's capacity for imaginative and emotional signification. It embraces the idea of the choreographic as a 'possibility of sensual address' (Joy 2014, 1), as an 'affective-political force' that mobilises the potential of imagination to generate dissent (Lepecki 2016, 17)—'to think through the present' (Martin 2012, 66). Building on analyses of dance as a site for 'challeng[ing] the practices of value-circulation [...] in contemporary capitalism' (Klein and Kunst 2012, 2), my contribution attends to the modalities through which choreography might intervene in the production of subjectivity in moments of crisis by calling upon the poetic and affective intensities of what we might term 'bodily refrains'. In particular, the article explores the ways in which, in the performances I examine, skill and intuition, control and abandonment are conjoined; it considers how the confusion between interiority and exteriority that characterises

contemporary subjectivity is critically exposed by these practices. In *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*, Svetlana Boym (2010, 12–13) explores how the interplay of opposites and paradoxes, the ‘renaming and remapping of *this* world’, can be conceptualised as an experience of freedom. This leads me to co-imagine with Boym that, through the interconnectedness between *technê* and *mania*—in their ambivalent meanings of art/craft and madness/inspiration—a space might be open for thinking ‘what if’: for a reconfiguration of social freedom, towards ‘another freedom’.

Dance and labour: Im/materiality and dis/orientation

In his analysis of the politico-economic manifestations of the global era, Virno investigates the shift in contemporary modes of being brought about by post-Fordism and introduces the category of the multitude, a form of life that is located beyond traditional divisions between individual and collective, private and public, one and many, and that transcends previously accepted categorisations of human experience. The advent of the multitude is a consequence of the ever-increasing changeability of the world around us, which is subject to (and, in turn, demands) incessant transformation. It signals the end of the clear separation between inside and outside that characterised the modern nation state and its people, and brings about a generalised sense of insecurity and disorientation, associated with the continuous ‘experience of “not feeling at home”’ (Virno 2004, 34). In the sphere of human activity, the speed at which contemporary reality is required to change also causes the dissolution of the classic distinction, first put forward by Aristotle, and later revived by Hannah Arendt ([1958] 1989), between labour (*poiesis*), political action (*praxis*) and thought (*theoría*). Instead of focusing on the production of new objects, post-Fordist labour, which is centred around the culture and communication industries, relies on the linguistic and cognitive abilities that once characterised the spheres of political action and thought. The talents required in post-industrial labour are shared by the multitude; they make up what Marxist thought identified as the ‘general intellect’, which has now come to encompass all human faculties: ‘to speak/to think are generic habits of the human animal, the opposite of any sort of specialization’ (Virno 2004, 41).

Immaterial post-Fordist labour ultimately becomes a communicative and performative activity, a virtuosic spectacle, which, instead of producing distinctive objects, finds its purpose in its own publicly-staged execution. As Virno postulates,

contemporary production becomes ‘virtuosic’ (and thus political) precisely because it includes within itself linguistic experience as such. If this is so, the matrix of post-Fordism can be found in the industrial sector in which there is ‘production of communication by means of communication’; hence, in the culture industry. (56)

In the age of post-industrial capitalism, the virtuosic talents which pertain to the performing artist are not only needed in political action (which traditionally relies on public speaking), but also in all areas of production: ‘while the material production of objects is delegated to an automated system of machines, the services rendered by living labor [...] resemble linguistic-virtuosic services more

and more' (58). Moreover, the need for changeability and mobility of post-Fordist modes of production leads to increased flexibility and shareability of labour, which replace traditional patterns of division of duties. In place of specialised expertise and skills, generic human faculties (speaking, thinking) are now required. Whilst, on the one hand, this transforms all labour into a communicative and performative activity (as already noted), on the other hand the reliance of labour on linguistic and cognitive faculties also results in the dissolution of the distinction between labour and non-labour, between work and free time. The whole person is involved in, and therefore subdued by, the process of production. Yet, although communication is at the centre of the post-Fordist era, the 'instrumental use of communication' ignores the complexity generated by a plural and multiple world: 'at the peak of the "communication society", we are paradoxically witnessing a *crisis of communication*' (Marazzi [1994] 2011, 43, original emphasis).

In dialogue with Virno and the Italian political philosophers who have critically examined post-Fordist social organisation and its modes of 'control' (Lazzarato 2006), Kunst offers a compelling reading of the relation that artistic practice entertains with these socio-political transformations. Kunst's understanding of crisis in the post-industrial world is that it is characterised by 'short (but not very effective) outbursts' (Kunst 2015, 110). If flexibility, changeability, and speed are at the centre of the social reorganisation brought about by post-Fordism, the sudden upheaval triggered by moments of crisis must be absorbed within the fast-paced, disharmonious, overlapping rhythms imposed by the new patterns and networks of labour. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of the new modes of production that penetrate every sphere of an individual's life also results in a permanent 'crisis of the autonomous subject' (114), inasmuch as all human faculties and potentialities are subjugated to the organisation of production and become a source of value: 'Not only is the division between work and life erased in post-industrial society; the once essential qualities of life after work (imagination, autonomy, sociality, communication) actually turn out to be at the core of contemporary work' (100–101). Because communication is integrated within the cycle of production, 'the worker's personality and subjectivity [are involved] within the production of value' (Lazzarato 1996, 135).

In order to understand the impact that these shifts have had on movement-based performance practices, Kunst reflects on how the transformation of social organisation and modes of production between industrial and post-industrial capitalism is mirrored by significant changes in the approach to movement in recent dance history. In particular, she observes how, for the modern dancers of the twentieth century, movement was a form of self-expression and a way to achieve emancipation from the constraints of social rules and work patterns. In contrast, in contemporary performance, movement can no longer be used as a medium for freedom insofar as it has already been subsumed by the new modes of production: 'Celebrated throughout the twentieth century as the discovery of the potentiality of freedom, the movement of the individual now stands at the centre of the appropriation; its affective, linguistic and desiring aspects are exploited' (Kunst 2015, 110). Thus, if movement is no longer synonymous with freedom, but has actually come to signify its opposite due to the crucial role it plays in the organisation of labour, how can dance still function as a critical practice? Kunst points towards recent trends in dance performance that have 'called for [...] a broadening of the notion of choreography' and suggests that 'the materiality of dance can

resist the abstracted notion of work and reveal the problematic connection between the abstracted new work modes and bodies' (119). In this sense, contemporary dance's capacity to employ movement as a form of resistance to, critique of, or emancipation from dominant socio-political modes lies in its ability to rethink movement beyond those modalities that have already entered the modes of production, including immateriality, flexibility, spontaneity, and expressiveness (which can no longer be associated with an ideal of freedom). In this respect, Kunst specifically examines duration and slowing down as subversive practices that have the potential to reveal how deeply our understanding of time and our need for speed, adaptability, and efficiency are shaped by external conditions—that is, how far our subjectivity is imbricated with social protocols: 'we need to think in the direction of duration as a dispossession that overwhelms us with non-functioning and non-operativity' (131).

For Kunst, duration can be thought to have critical value in the sense that it sabotages dominant patterns of perception and operation and disables us by deactivating our attention. Pursuing this line of thinking around duration and our socially-conditioned understanding of it, I propose to look specifically at rhythm, refrain, and repetition as movement modalities that, through sustained engagement (that is, also in conjunction with duration), call instead for a reactivation of our ability to perceive and reawaken what Berardi calls 'the emotional body'. Shifting the focus away from choreographic practices founded on the 'exhaustion' of dance (Lepecki 2006)—that is, on the refusal to identify dance with movement—I engage with contemporary work that has signalled a turn in choreo-dramaturgical approaches away from the logic and politics of the exhaustion of movement. In the last decade, experimental choreography has 'called for a connection between movement and dance', engaging with the temporality of movement in ways that challenge the attention of the spectator (Kunst 2015, 119). I suggest that the modalities of movement of the works I discuss, which draw on the repetitive rhythmicity of social dance traditions, trigger a reflection on and an assessment of contemporary dance's dramaturgical choices—they solicit the discernment, the judgement that the experience of crisis requires. Engaging with intensive movement in tight formations, they bring physical effort back into dance, foregrounding the entanglement of exertion and skill, excess and rule to articulate a critical and affective response to the immaterial and dispersed conditions of living in the present.

The engagement with repetitive patterns of movement and variations of speed as a form of socio-political critique is not new in the history of performance practices. Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* (1936) is a well-known example of a performative satire of the ideology of liberal capitalism, through sequences that expose and problematise Taylorism's 'denial of individuality' and 'deskilling of labour' (van Wijhe 2013, 8). In particular, the famous scene of the assembly line 'deregulates' Taylorism's social choreography of efficiency and scientific management by performing its failure (ibid.). Moreover, with specific reference to dance practices, rhythm and repetition have of course a long and varied tradition as movement and dramaturgical devices. I am thinking, for instance, of modalities of repetition connected with minimalist movement experiments and with the germinal work of the Judson Church choreographers from the 1960s onwards. In contrast with these uses of repetitive patterns, what I examine in this article is how, in a number of recent choreographic works, a distinctly uncompromising exploration of rhythm and

repetition is accompanied by a renewed interest in folk traditions. I argue that this signals the desire to reflect on the organisation of time in a different socio-historical context and relies on the capacity to invite reflection and activate judgement through operations of displacement. What is distinctive in the examples I discuss is their engagement with the rhythmic and affective intensity of movement as a means to evoke the group solidarity of social dance traditions, expose its loss and the resulting disorientation, and mobilise forms of cohesion in the present.

Igor and Moreno's *Idiot-Syncrasy* centres around the act of jumping and has the feel of fast-paced southern-European folk dances such as the Italian tarantella; Sciarroni's *Folk-s* draws on the Schuhplattler, a Bavarian and Tyrolean folk dance in which the performers hop, stomp and slap their thighs, knees, and shoes with their hands; Sciarroni's *Chroma* explores the practice and concept of turning through the act of a body rotating incessantly around its axis, in a manner reminiscent of the intensity and abandon involved in Sufi whirling. The works have in common a strong emphasis on physical endurance: they rely on training the body to execute a repetitive action to the limit of exhaustion. Nevertheless, it appears that these recent choreographic works do not foreground the social dimension of the folk dance and/or music elements they draw on; instead, by emphasising the intensive rhythmicity of the traditional languages they take inspiration from, through an obstinate, nearly obsessive use of repetition and circular patterns, these works expose the affective potency of the dancing body. In this sense, I understand the relentlessness of the rhythmical gestures and sequences in Igor and Moreno's and Sciarroni's works as a recourse to repetition first and foremost as a 'protective strategy', one which is used 'in the face of the shock caused by new and unexpected experiences'—that is, in the face of crisis (Virno 2004, 39). Moreover, through the stability and predictability of its structure, repetition is also offered in these choreographies as a modality through which individuals may re-orient themselves to the environment and 'territorialize' (Berardi 2012, 130)—as an opportunity to rediscover social solidarity.

Danced refrains: Reclaiming singularity and common space

Igor and Moreno's artistic collaboration started in 2007. Igor Urzelai is from the Basque Country and Moreno Solinas is from Sardinia; they are associate artists at The Place, London. Their duet *Idiot-Syncrasy*, which premiered in 2013, was conceived as a work about perseverance, as an attempt to offer a vision for change. They introduce their piece with these words:

We started with wanting to change the world with a performance. We felt like idiots. Then we danced a lot. We jumped. We called on the folk traditions of Sardinia and the Basque Country. We sang. We jumped some more. We committed. Now we promise to stick together. We promise to persevere. We promise to do our best. (Igor and Moreno n.d.)

The performance opens with Igor and Moreno standing in front of the audience: in simple clothes, incongruously dressed in jeans and anoraks done up to their necks, they present the audience with their a-cappella singing, which starts quietly and then gains momentum. It is a Sardinian folk song

from the eighteenth century, a protest hymn against feudal exploitation, which became known as the island's pro-independence anthem. A song of resistance and opposition to the tyranny of the land owners, urging them to show restraint and warning them that a war against their arrogance has already been declared. Igor and Moreno sing it in a loop for well over five minutes; the singing becomes almost hypnotic—it has the quality of the 'incantatory refrains' Guattari writes about in *The Machinic Unconscious*, where he reflects on the rituals that 'every individual, every group, every nation is [...] "equipped" with' (Guattari [1979] 2011, 107); refrains that assist us in finding personal and social cohesion and resisting deterritorialisation when navigating the proliferation of events and constant changes of the environment. The opening of Igor and Moreno's performance places us in relation to a modality of semiotisation which, although abstracted from its context (it is a song from Moreno's homeland and would not explicitly resonate with many audiences), relies on the refrain as a 'function of the collective and asignifying subject of the enunciation' (ibid.). As such, it signals the possibility of collective identification—a form of recognition with which post-Fordist societies have lost familiarity, having substituted it with internalised refrains and the 'rhythmic schemata of machinic propositions' originating from media and network technologies (109).

The duo's singing is a vocal performance of escalating vigour and drama, which almost imperceptibly becomes accompanied by rhythmical movement: a foot tapping the floor to keep time progressively turns into rocking and then into solid, steady bouncing. Once the jumping becomes established, the two bodies' movements continue following the same regular rhythm for nearly forty minutes, until an energy shift morphs them into more grounded steps in a spiralling pattern: Igor and Moreno end up in each other's arms, spent by the incessant hopping and dizzy with exhaustion. For the duration of their rhythmical jumping, their movements are choreographed so as to allow glimpses of the performers' distinct individualities. Little by little the two young men in front of us reveal the interplay between the choreographed patterns and their singularity: as they take off their jackets and then more layers of clothes until they are wearing just a t-shirt and shorts, we begin to identify Igor as the tidy, punctilious one who, while Moreno carelessly drops everything onto the floor, folds every item he removes even when this implies extra effort and agility to accomplish the tasks without interrupting the jumping. As we notice these *idio-syncretasies*, we warm to them—'around 30 minutes into the show, everyone is loving Igor and Moreno, and some of the audience are cheering them along' (Mackrell 2015). A channel of communication is established between the performers and the audience which engages the spectators' attention and stimulates their capacity to perceive.

The repetitive and rhythmic qualities of the jumping enable us to identify relations: between singular movements and the whole choreography, or between the specific event of the performance and the complex patterns of our daily existence. For Guattari, refrains serve the function of defining a territory, whether personal or collective. And, as already mentioned, Berardi draws on Guattari when foregrounding the refrain—and rhythm, as its distinctive feature—as a relational mode that, by enabling recognition and territorialisation, could support the emancipation of language and affects in the information economy.



Image 1: Idiot-Syncrasy by Igor and Moreno. Credit: Alicia Clarke 2013

The refrain is an obsessive ritual that allows the individual [...] to find identification points, and to territorialize herself and to represent herself in relation to the surrounding world. The refrain is the modality of semiotization that allows an individual (a group, a people, a nation, a subculture, a movement) to receive and project the world according to reproducible and communicable formats. [...] Rhythm is the relation of a subjective flow of signs (musical, poetic, gestural signs) with the environment: the cosmic environment, earthly environment, social environment. (Berardi 2012, 130, 131)

Guattari and Berardi are concerned with the ways in which changes to the organisation of refrains have transformed the processes through which subjectivity is produced. Reflecting on the effects of the globalisation of mass media, Guattari ([1992] 1995, 104) discusses how ‘the neutralisation, the systematic dequalification, of the materials of expression’ resulting from the informatisation of communication have led to the standardisation of subjectivity. In dialogue with Guattari, Berardi depicts a world in which ‘singularity is forgotten, erased, and cancelled’ (Berardi 2012, 146). Berardi’s writing is borne out of the European crisis, the ‘financial collapse’ which, from 2010 onwards, led to ‘the beginning of an insurrection’ in the form of strikes and protests against the debt crisis in Athens, strikes and demonstrations against austerity measures in Rome, the occupations of public spaces in Spain in Spring 2011, and the London riots in August 2011 (7). His philosophical analysis engages with the role of language, media, and information technology in

post-industrial capitalism. In *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, the focus of Berardi's discussion is the point of rupture between industrial capitalism, based on the 'physical, muscular work of industrial production', and post-industrial or financial capitalism, which Berardi calls 'semio-capitalism', in which 'indeterminacy takes the place of the fixed relation between labor-time and value' (86).

In Berardi's reading, this is not simply an issue at the level of our economy; it affects language and communication as well. As currencies were freed from the gold standard, the relationship between time and value has also become aleatory. Semantic exchanges are involved in the same process: sign and object have become autonomous entities, and language has been divorced from affective communication, having lost its evocative potential. 'Signs produce signs without any longer passing through the flesh' (17). The deregulation of signifying processes and consequent deactivation of the affective sphere have irremediably compromised social autonomy. 'In the age of infinite acceleration of the infosphere' (10), financial and linguistic automatism have resulted in a separation from our instincts, from our sentient bodies. Pursuing the ethico-aesthetic paradigm outlined by Guattari in his late book *Chaosmosis* as a path towards the reconceptualisation of subjectivity,² Berardi advocates the role of refrains that break with expectations, allow singularity to emerge and 'create resonances [which] may produce common space' (147).

In *Idiot-Syncrasy*, Igor and Moreno employ simple spatio-dynamic devices to produce variation within the repetition: they modify their steps; they create lines through the space; in turn, they temporarily disappear behind the wings; they add or remove layers of t-shirts. Admittedly, they resort at times to banal expedients to generate unexpected opportunities of interaction with the audience, such as when (always jumping) they open a bottle of whisky, pour themselves a shot, and pass the rest around to the spectators for us to help ourselves. Yet, through the unpretentious character of their performance, they are able to establish a closeness with members of the audience. In spectating such display of endurance, their sweat and heavy breathing, we reflect on the power of commitment and perseverance; we think about what human bodies—not just theirs, but also our own—can *do* in the present. '[W]e need refrains that disentangle singular existence from the social game of competition and productivity: [...] refrains of the singularization and sensibilization of breathing' (146). It is no longer a case of us and them; we share a common space.

Performing exhaustion: Non-exchangeability and sensuous understanding

The work of the Italian performance artist Alessandro Sciarroni offers a reflection on the relationship between choreographic action and time, through an exploration of duration and endurance as critical performative practices. *Folk-s* is the first of a trilogy of works entitled *Will you still love me tomorrow?*, which engage with skilled actions displaced from their original context and presented as (repurposed) performative practices. In the case of *Folk-s*, the seven performers learn the Bavarian and Tyrolean popular dance form of the Schuhplattler, which is then reconstructed in the context of a durational stage performance, stripped of its traditional costumes and musical accompaniment.

For the performers of *Folk-s*, there's no other time than the present, a time that is not-past and not-future. It's the infinite insistence of the tide against the sand, the endless return of the same wave to the same shore. It's sound. In the repetition, geographically and culturally decontextualized, the folk material finds its clearest revelation. (Sciarroni n.d.)

As one of the dancers explains to the audience at the beginning of the show, we have permission to leave during the performance, but we do not have the option to come back. Equally, the dancers will decide when to exit the stage. The performance will carry on so long as there is at least one spectator watching and one performer dancing. The execution of the dance, an acrobatic male courtship ritual in its social context, aims to engage with its rhythmical, repetitive patterns (the percussive actions of hands hitting shoes, knees and thighs in an endless loop) rather than with its content (Sciarroni n.d.). The folk-dance element is further decontextualised by replacing the traditional accordion music with the absence of musical accompaniment (not the same as silence, as the slapping of hands and stomping of feet are always audible), interspersed with a diverse playlist of genres from orchestra music to pop tunes. The steps of the popular dance style are assumed as the starting point for an exploration of simple variations of formation, directionality, and sequencing. The dancers' actions are strongly connoted as fatiguing due to the effort and undivided concentration the performance requires: they contend with physical tiredness and with the challenge of performing to a random soundtrack with continuous changes of rhythm, for an unknown duration (which, on some occasions, reached well over two hours) and to a decreasing number of spectators (Chiappori 2017).



Image 2: Folk-s, will you still love me tomorrow? by Alessandro Sciarroni. Credit: Andrea Macchia 2013

As I have already discussed, Virno reflects on how post-Fordism has transformed the organisation of human activity, infusing productive labour with the publicness and virtuosity of political action. I suggest that this work by Sciarroni intervenes in our understanding of these relationships as they shape contemporary life, foregrounding the physical body and its affective power as the medium for a rethinking of virtuosic activity—intended, following Virno (who in turn acknowledges Arendt), as the domain of both the performing arts and political action. In *Folk-s*, the attributes of the traditional categories of activity (*poiesis*, *praxis*, and *theoría*) are confounded, as strenuous activity (conventionally associated with *poiesis*, with making and labour) comes to qualify *praxis*, that is, virtuosic, public action with an end in itself. As we watch the seven performers (including Sciarroni) repurpose the steps of the Schuhplattler, we become more and more conscious of their commitment and perseverance: our focus moves away from the choreography and the variations it deploys to keep the dance going and is drawn instead to the remarkable force that fuels the performance event. Moreover, the piece also offers a space for thinking about the organisation of time and human activity themselves, translating and displacing an action from its traditional context to the present. What we witness in this performance is the dancers' resilience, their going on and on, all the way to exhaustion (and exit). When most of the performers have left the stage, having exited almost unnoticed one by one, the two remaining dancers prepare to perform one final sequence, to the notes of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*: facing each other, they slowly bring their arms to position, sliding their thumbs up the sides of their chests to just below their shoulders, to hold the imaginary straps of the lederhosen (the traditional costume they would be wearing, but are not); then they pause, in an intense moment of contemplation and recognition of each other, until they let go of their pose and, together, walk out of the stage: 'So you think you can tell Heaven from Hell, blue skies from pain. [...] We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year'.

Through the cycle of repetitions, the movement refrains generate a form of communication based on 'a common ground of understanding' (Berardi 2012, 147) by inducing entrainment between dancers and with the spectators: 'A trust builds among [the dancers], which the audience starts to share, cheering them on, laughing with them as they acknowledge their exhaustion' (Burke 2015). Exhaustion is what this performance produces: exhausted dancers and exhausted spectators, after a marathon performance. I venture that this is significant in two different, albeit connected, ways. On the one hand, it blurs the distinction between labour and activity through an event that generates a surplus-value of an unusual kind, a product that cannot be expropriated and turned into profit: exhaustion itself. On the other hand, the resulting exhaustion is not an erasure of potentialities; on the contrary, by entailing a heightened connection with the faculties of the human body, which are engaged to their fullest capacity (either through performing or through spectating), it awakens the affective potencies of communication. Arguably, in the physical exhaustion at play in these works, a force can be detected akin to the emancipatory potential that the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo identifies in nihilism, rejecting tragic readings of Nietzsche's thought and drawing attention to the idea 'that it is not possible to build without destroying' (Vattimo 2004, xxvii). For Vattimo, rethinking nihilism in terms of the constraints it frees us from means underscoring its relationship with ideas of freedom and liberation.³ More specifically, in these

dances, exhaustion becomes synonymous with ‘excess of sensuousness’, the strategy for the reactivation of the emotional body that Berardi ascribes to poetry (Berardi 2012, 21).⁴

In Sciarroni’s latest work *Chroma_don’t be frightened of turning the page*, the audience is similarly called to synchronise with a performance, this time a solo, of stark simplicity, featuring Sciarroni unceasingly spinning at the centre of a bare stage, with the spectators sitting on all four sides. Unpretentious and unembellished, Sciarroni’s execution is focused on maintaining pace and balance; his arms go through a myriad of positions without following a predetermined sequence and his spiralling around the stage creates different looping patterns—the wandering of a man tracing his paths in this world. His commitment to the repeated action is unfaltering throughout the thirty-five minutes of the performance, as we witness a body’s complete focus and complete abandon, its extemporaneous reactions passing through Sciarroni’s changing facial expressions. The work is the outcome of a longer research project on turning and the phenomenon of migration, which explores the cyclical patterns of journeys across geographical territories and emotional landscapes.



Image 3: Chroma_don't be frightened of turning the page by Alessandro Sciarroni. Credit: Alessandro Sciarroni 2017

I argue that Sciarroni's repetitive steps are a response to the generalised feeling of anxiety and insecurity Virno attributes to today's world, the experience of 'not feeling at home': they are an attempt at making a home in the here and now of the performance event, in the here and now of today—even when, or perhaps especially because, the here and now manifest themselves as 'nonlocalizable, nondimensional chaos' (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 344). They are a 'strategy of reassurance' (Virno 2004, 35), but also a way of rediscovering personal coherence and social cohesion. They visualise and spatialise Guattari's and Berardi's idea of the refrain as a ritual of identification and territorialisation, a way of understanding one's place in the world. They are wordless poetry in motion, obsessive refrains of the body that exceed communication and interpretation and tap into our affects and desires, into the 'infinite ambiguity of meaning as sensuous understanding' (Berardi 2012, 21). In a time characterised by 'pervasive insecurity' and 'social and political disorientation' (Marazzi [1994] 2011, 67), these danced refrains allow for judgement and discernment in the face of crisis, recovering the capacity of our faculties to escape the logic of exchange and engage in the production of 'shared meaning: the creation of a new world' (Berardi 2012, 147).

Between judgement and imagination: Endurance and/as freedom

In these recent examples of European choreography, the dancing body envisions a mode of being in and thinking with crisis—in and with disorientation, insecurity, failed communication, erosion of singularity, loss of social cohesion, permanent self-reinvention. The moving body enlists our attention and compels us to engage with 'the *entirety* of human faculties' (Virno 2004, 84), reclaiming them from the sphere of labour-power and biopolitics to the space of art—that is, restoring their affective function as an essential component of their productive potential. The body's endurance is tested to the limit and exhaustion is offered as the outcome of this labouring activity: a product with no apparent value and no exchangeability. Nevertheless, what we are observing here is not the erasure of the idea of value through the negation of surplus, but rather the conflation of excess with exhaustion, which in turn frustrates the patterns of 'homogenization of exchange and valorization' that characterise the information economy (Berardi 2012, 147). In this sense, exhaustion becomes a critical concept for rethinking current paradigms of productivity. The intensive engagement with the body's faculties and senses traces the path for the rediscovery of the emotional body and its communicative potentialities.

Through their insistence on rhythm, refrain, and repetition, the performing bodies of the works I have discussed become vehicles for poetic signification; they exceed the logic of exchange and instrumentality by reclaiming their creative, transformative, and relational power. Poetry is here intended, with Berardi, as the language of excess, of emancipation from fixed correspondences, of singularity and its infinite possibilities—a hidden resource which enables us to shift from one paradigm to another' (Berardi 2012, 140). As such, the poetic bodies of these dances resist the social and emotional fragmentation of today's world, giving articulation to singular occurrences among its multiple dispositions. Their refrains borrow patterns and *paces* that in specific socio-cultural conjunctures are associated with home, with commonality, offering a moment of

reassurance in a time of uncertainty. They fleetingly reconnect singular sensitivity with plural meanings and shared understanding. Calling upon folk movement practices, these works allow the reverberation of different social ways of being to reawaken the possibility of social cohesion. In other words, whilst the traditional practices they draw on are mobilised through an attention to their *motifs*⁵ (their formal qualities and the affective intensities they conjure) beyond their specific social contents and contexts, this process of displacement generates resonances and materialises the possibility of a common ground of understanding.

In the era of 'no future' (Marazzi [1994] 2011), of 'not feeling at home' and of 'being exposed omnilaterally to the world' (Virno 2004, 34), these examples of choreography offer a vision, invite us to co-imagine an alternative space, a space of freedom. Also reflecting on the transformations that have accompanied the advent of the communication society, Vattimo proposes that 'to live in a pluralistic world means to experience freedom as a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation' (Vattimo [1989] 1992, 10). These stances call us to acknowledge the limitations of our own situation as a pre-requisite to overcoming disorientation. Invoking Boym's rethinking of freedom as the space of 'what if', as the exploration of spatial and temporal discontinuities and the adventure of traversing border zones and confronting paradoxes, I suggest that these dance works, while compelling us to think in and with crisis, also ask us to imagine a 'between' and a 'beyond' (Boym, 2010)—the *between* of co-creation, which encompasses both individuality and commonality, of 'conjunction' as a 'becoming-other' (Berardi 2012, 24), and the *beyond* of adventure, of poetry as generative excess. By acknowledging the uncertainty and exhaustion that characterise the present moment and the need for strategies of reassurance in the face of crisis, these performances are able to mobilise a space of freedom through a cross-cultural approach that conjures other worlds and their past or distant rituals of identification and territorialisation. For Boym, freedom is not found in the absence of boundaries; rather, it presupposes an encounter between 'convention and invention, responsibility and play' (Boym 2010, 5). It is an experience of co-creation which arises from the interaction of imagination with judgement, 'the most urgent form of passionate thinking,⁶ which mediates between universal and particular, theory and practice; [...] a border zone between precedent and unprecedented' (27). As such, freedom suggests an interplay of 'introspection' and 'care for shared worldliness' (28), an openness to invention, creativity and experimentation, combined with an engagement with existing practices, paradigms and architectures. In Boym's words, rethinking freedom also means re-examining the relationship between *mania* and *technê*, starting from their articulation in Greek tragedy. It entails conceptualising freedom as reciprocal movement between Dionysian inspiration and Promethean skill, between '*deliverance* from worldly conditions [and] *deliberation* about them' (42, original emphasis), feeding on the tension between the two. In the choreographic works I have discussed, the experience of being beside oneself with dizziness and exhaustion combines with technical skill to articulate a critical and emotional response to today's crisis of knowledge (Martin 2015) and crisis of communication (Marazzi [1994] 2011).

Confronting the forms of submission and the insecurities of the contemporary moment, works such as Igor and Moreno's *Idiot-Syncrasy* and Sciarroni's *Folk-s* and *Chroma* call on both *technê* and *mania* and, ultimately, on 'judgement and imagination', to 'negotiate the space of "between" and

“beyond”, collective and individual, precedent and unprecedented’, tradition and invention, rule and excess (Boym 2010, 29). Endurance and exhaustion are the path to reclaiming a space for singularity and solidarity. When Igor and Moreno end their dizzying hopping in each other’s arms, their exhaustion coincides with their acknowledgement that they have each other, that they are not alone. When the performers of *Folk-s* exit the stage, they do not leave an empty space: their jumping continues to resonate as a bouncing back and forth between individual and group, echoing questions about one’s place in the world. When Sciarroni embarks with utter concentration and complete abandon on a ritual of territorialisation in *Chroma*, a new world is made possible, where we can feel at home. The faculties of the emotional body, from its physical stamina to its affective potentiality, are summoned to rethink strategies of reassurance, individuation, and social organisation as critical and engaged routes to ‘another freedom’.

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Notes

¹ Italian workerism (*operaismo*) was an autonomist movement of thought which reassessed the Marxist philosophical tradition following the period of social and political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. Post-workerists focus on the understanding of the changes in the organisation of labour that characterise post-industrial capitalism.

² Concerned with new possibilities of being and ethico-political configurations, Guattari considers all spheres of human activity and the paradigms they embody; he identifies art as the paradigm capable of ‘engender[ing] unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being’, which support the creation of collective subjectivities (Guattari 1995, 106).

³ Vattimo is best known as a philosopher of postmodernity and theorist of ‘weak thought’, as well as for his political career. The foundations of his philosophy lie predominantly in Heidegger’s hermeneutics and in Nietzsche’s nihilism. Vattimo understands nihilism as ‘the dissolution of any ultimate foundation’ (Vattimo [2003] 2004, xxv), which he describes as the condition of Western culture in the age of postmodernity. For Vattimo, emancipation, which he defines as a ‘process in which constraints are shed and we gain greater freedom, autonomy, and opportunity to choose’ (Vattimo [2003] 2004, xxv), is a direct consequence of today’s dissolution of foundations.

⁴ It should be noted here that, whilst my discussion of exhaustion stems from an observation of the potentialities of physical exhaustion as mobilised in these examples of choreography, the idea of exhaustion as ‘an opening out of new possibilities in/for dance’ is discussed by Efrosini Protopapa (2016, 168) in response to Lepecki’s theorisation of Western contemporary dance’s ‘exhaustion’ of the concept of movement, that is, of its ‘questioning of dance’s identity as a *being-in-flow*’, of its rejection of ‘the bind between dance and movement’ (Lepecki 2006, 1, original emphasis).

⁵ With this term, which I borrow from Guattari, I aim to evoke the formal and structural qualities of the dances, beyond the semantic fixity that the idea of 'form' suggests. Guattari (1995, 17) writes: 'Like Bakhtin, I would say that the refrain is not based on elements of form, material or ordinary signification, but on the detachment of an existential "motif" (or leitmotiv) which installs itself like an "attractor" within a sensible and significational chaos'. Similarly, the term *pace* I use above follows Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between 'pace' and 'form' as it operates in the refrain: 'a calm and stable "pace" (rather than a form) organised around a 'fragile point' that the *ritournelle* establishes in the midst of chaos (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 344).

⁶ For Boym, 'passionate' means 'yielding to the "nearness" of life, to everyday experience, relying upon one's curiosity and listening to worldliness. Passionate thinking is not thinking through mastery; it is fundamentally about understanding, not control. Understanding means yielding to the uncomfortable and incalculable' (Boym 2010, 25).

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Biography

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