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Meeting on Paper

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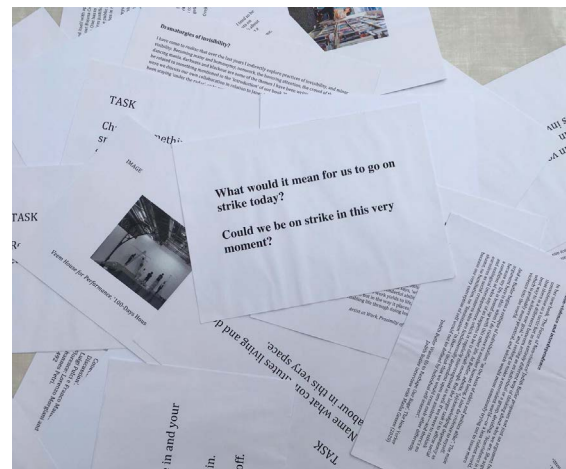
EFROSINI PROTOPAPA AND KONSTANTINA GEORGELOU

What you will experience in the next few pages arises from our desire to partly document and partly revisit, share and continue a dialogue that we began as part of our performative presentation ‘Meeting Again: Dramaturgy as a practice of lateral movement’ for the UniArts Futures Lecture Series (2020). For that event, we set up a performative dialogue in order to think through statements, questions, suppositions and fragments of thought in the live situation. To enable that process, we followed a score that required us to move laterally in the space, unfolding different types of materials and creating something like a floor map inspired by the principles of tic-tac-toe; this allowed us to practice dramaturgy as a generative but also disruptive operation. New thought and connections emerged between theoretical propositions, arguments and counter-arguments, as well as speculations, actions, confessions and even fictional proclamations. This then was an event that allowed us to not only share and be with the (un)known, but also experiment with ways of knowing (and not knowing) while working together, in practice and performatively.

Here, we resume the dialogue and experiment with the notion of lateral movement on the page. We devise a way of searching for and sharing knowledge that can hold and even amplify the unknowns of our exchange. In particular, we explore and propose a new form of dialogue that acknowledges the vitality of language in our experiment. This dialogue counter-balances our tendency to approach knowledge formation (and the unknowns of that process) predominately through linear—often argumentative, in our practices—writing. Small units of text are boxed on the page and seek to iterate thought laterally, parenthetically and in mutable temporalities, instead of requiring a process of looking for depth in a linear progressive way. Our practice

of writing in units developed through an affirmative acknowledgement of working and living under short and quick attention spans—a practice influenced by constant daily and demanding shifts between teaching, writing, making art, administration, parenting and so forth, which has led to our shared experience of the impossibility of undertaking long-term research. The invitation to the reader then, we hope, is one that allows distraction, reflection, daydreaming and wondering to happen *as*, or even *instead of*, a more conventional approach to analytical depth. Using a number of materials—including concepts, reflections, anecdotes, speculation and the capacity of our bodies to remember and to imagine how we might continue to work alongside one another on the page—we revisit and expand on issues of attention, labour, (in)visibility and the micro-politics of being and thinking with one another.

Our last project together was about the practice of dramaturgy in performance-making processes (2017). Here, we meet to explore dramaturgically ways to approach, uncover, share, process, disrupt and live with one another’s (un)knowns on paper.



■ Materials from Georgelou's and Protopapa's Futures Lecture Series presentation, UniArts, Helsinki, March 2020.

Moving laterally, sideways, instead of linearly and directly, possibilizes decentring, incidentalness and obliqueness in knowledge and attention; it also allows me to circulate around a particular concern for a long time, to get absorbed into this while acknowledging how distraction is a constitutive part of the process. One of the aims is to resist the anxiety of reasserting knowledge, to suspend knowing, to spend time with and maintain what is present in any process of knowing. In research—academic and artistic—we are oftentimes valued in terms of innovative contributions and breakthrough ideas that adhere to an ethics of heroism and individual exceptionalism. While this happens, academics and artists remain underpaid and overworked, worn out from the pressure of having to constantly chase and produce the ‘new’, most frequently on their own. Lauren Berlant politicizes laterality when she discusses ‘lateral agency’. She describes a state of ‘scavenging for survival’ (2011: 262), where one has to look for the new idioms of the political from the baselines of survival. She writes, ‘agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; and embodying, alongside embodiment’ (100). What if agency in the arts and the humanities were an activity of knowledge maintenance, fantasy and embodying? And what if this agency can only be a collective and distributed activity?

Re-read something you read earlier today.

The experience of ‘getting stuck’, of not knowing what to do with one’s own attention in duration, is discussed by Bojana Kunst (2015). She shows how duration can evoke an experience of powerlessness and dispossession of the self, where the self can no longer be experienced nor valued in terms of its own productivity and effectiveness—that is, disruption of continuous, flexible and efficient movement, which usually defines contemporary self-actualization. ‘The consequence of this temporal redundancy is the dispossession of our inner sense of time, whereby our attention no longer empowers our subjective experience’ (126). As one cannot undergo usual processes of subjectivization, where the value of the subject and the sense of an ‘individual self’ are determined through work and production, in these cases ‘our attention [is] waiting’ (ibid.). Maurice Blanchot, whom Kunst references in the same article, writes about attention in his reading of French philosopher and political activist Simone Weil’s work:

Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something with which one might concern oneself. Attention waits. It waits without precipitation, leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it in. Attention is the emptiness of thought oriented by a gentle force and maintained in an accord with the empty intimacy of time. (Blanchot 2003: 121)

I walk down the ramp of a contemporary art museum, pushing a buggy with a sleeping baby. Great—I will be able to watch this performance uninterrupted. I approach the dancers who are moving around, sometimes in structured intentional formations, sometimes more freely, in a way that appears as rather unrehearsed. I recognize a quality of improvisation, as I also recognize skill, not just in terms of their technical level, but also in the way each one keeps their attention to their own body-mind, while holding my attention (and that of so many others) just by doing what they do, dance. I wonder about Bojana Cvejić's term 'self-legitimization by performance', when she explains how '[s]howing doing does not ultimately depend on an audience or the public for its legitimization; legitimization lies primarily in the self-judgment that one establishes in relation to oneself' (2017: 6). Here, this could be found perhaps in the way each performer exercises a mode of attention towards oneself. I wonder where choreography lies in this. Or, what kind of choreography this is.

Baby wakes up. I need to hold her while watching, which all seems fine. The dance continues; I am not interrupting anything apparently. I can go and come back, stay for as long as I want, with baby or without. Following Cvejić, I would argue that what matters here is that the dancer appears, but that she appears first and foremost to herself; she not only does, but shows doing, again not necessarily to me or her co-performers, but first and foremost to herself. And this then becomes the basis on which Cvejić criticizes the dance performance that appears in the museum space (especially the solo dance), which arguably reinforces an 'individualist ontology', whereby

the intimate and private act of communication... consists of the situation in which the dancer seems, in the first place, to reveal her art to herself with herself, where others are allowed to observe this as an emergence of discovery. (Cvejić 2017: 8)

On the one hand, I am experiencing a sense of relief, as I am able to watch this performance in a distracted manner, for as long and in as many chunks as I want. On the other hand, I am wanting to shake up this dancer's 'own aesthetic experience', of dancing with 'their private emotional, sensual, creative self' (Cvejić 2017: 18). What if I am there in the museum as a visitor (and an artist), attending to the performance in whatever way I can, but what I am also doing is in fact, as Cvejić says, celebrating, or even re-enforcing, this individual dancing with one's own aestheticized self? Is there any other way for me to choreograph myself towards a different kind of engagement with this public space, to attend to another possibility of a collective way of being there, together with others?

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What if invisibility becomes the plan, the condition or the goal rather than the consequence? I do not propose invisibility as a vague and non-directed concept, but as a tactic that would require discerning how and what is worthwhile to retain from the terrain of visibility and circulation, from whom/what and at which ends. If, on the one hand, visibility results to appropriation by the capital, and, on the other, invisibility is a project towards exploitation by the capital, then what are those aspects and features of artistic work that can be routed in either way?

In writing about art's ambivalent closeness to capitalism, Bojana Kunst observes that artistic work is no longer necessarily about creativity (about making some thing), but about (ongoing) activity, work that seems to be performed for its own sake. In this context, she proposes 'doing less' as 'an important aesthetic and ethical attitude for the artist as a worker', and goes on to explore how art may open up human activity and being to the kind of activity that is always less than it could be. In doing so, Kunst references Heller Roazen, who states:

To grasp a human action as such, one must look to the shadows of the more minor acts it inevitably projects around it; to those unaccomplished acts that are less than it and that could always have been performed in its stead. (Roazen cited in Kunst 2015: 192)

In other words, when I act, my act includes everything that I am not doing, or perhaps the small imperceptible acts that I am also doing. My art *work*—my work as an artist—always includes all the possibilities of action that remain to be done, or that forever will remain not done, undone.

Our book—*The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on actions in performance* (2017), co-written with Danae Theodoridou—puts forward the idea of dramaturgy as ‘working on actions’. In our teaching and workshops, we have often proposed a way of working that is about constantly doing, or doing and redoing, forming and transforming, giving and receiving, creating variations, disrupting, extracting, layering.

At the same time, we have always tried to remain open to the question of how an action might not only be about doing, but also about its negative, about undoing. And so the story of Burtleby comes to mind, and his famous ‘I would prefer not to’. This is, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, pure negation—not a refusal to do something in particular, nor a form of resistance. In fact, the latter would possibly only reinforce an existing situation, even through, or precisely as, it opposes that very situation. Pure negation, however, works differently. It brings about a calm silence—an ominous passivity.

To lower and condition visibility, one might have to think *with* the practices of fugitivity, infiltration and darkness. For Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, fugitivity articulates the collective embracing of a state of dispossession, a ‘being together in homelessness’ (2013: 11). Fugitivity involves practices of hiding, infiltrating, taking space and organizing but not settling. It deregulates while not fighting on the front line.

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I side with Kunst’s consideration of attention as a process of waiting, an emptying out of thought and knowledge. It arguably echoes Kathi Weeks’s discussion of ‘nonwork’. A state of nonwork is impossible to imagine, exactly because of the constant production and reproduction of the subject as a worker, whose existence and determination of their self depends on their levels of productivity. Contemporary subjectivity, Weeks has argued, is constructed through work, and the anxiety of losing the ‘individual selves’ in the case of nonwork is extreme (2016: 252, 260). While for Weeks nonwork is impossible to imagine, Kunst detects experience of dispossession and non-mobilization of attention and knowledge in performances. Perhaps it is through embodying experiences of attention in duration that nonwork can be sensed, before it can be imagined.

Imagine: I am writing this while being on strike. But striking from what? From which profession, which institution, which precise job title? I am experiencing a paradox. I can barely think of any professional capacity from which I can strike in the sense of withdrawing my labour. The (amount of) work will still be there when I return—in fact, it will have increased. The work is happening all the time. The work stays with me, it keeps being informed by my time—any kind of time—and I can barely stop it. Is there any way for us to go on strike today?

In ‘The new arachne’, Boyan Manchev discusses metamorphosis, disorganization and dynamic form in a mythopoetic context. Based on Ovid’s myth of *Arachne*—a woman who was transformed into a spider because of her hubris to the goddess Athena—Manchev arrives at a critique towards flexible life forms that become commodities by the capital. He stresses the concept of resistance as the power of transformation that passes through the body form and makes body-subjects transform themselves.

Arachne has the astounding technique of weaving, but she only uses it in order to make a sacrifice to the gods impossible, Manchev explains. Instead of offering her technique to them, as expected, she uses the techniques of metabolism and auto-absorption to incorporate her victims and to transform them into the thread. Through these techniques, the body of Arachne becomes ungraspable to the gods and does not leave anything as an outcome or left-over for them. Manchev writes that this is not about an idea of a proto-life form, but a mobilization of dynamic form. Form is never static. ‘Arachne’s body externalizes itself by disorganizing itself’ (2015: 25). The technical power of the body is its immanent possibility to transform, through the dis-organization and re-configuration of its own operations.

Identify something that constitutes living and dead labour on this very page. Imagine what might constitute living and dead labour on the next page.

In the epilogue of our book—*The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on actions in performance* (2017), co-written with Danae Theodoridou—we get to a point where we discuss dramaturgy as an ‘infrastructural and systemic affair’ (272); and we try to consider how dramaturgy potentially works with and gives rise to (counter-)movements, affiliations, conspiracies, interventions. What if the most obvious way to be part of any structure (or infrastructure) is to be constantly thinking about how to bend it, in order to fulfil different purposes, or even introduce inconsistencies at its very heart, reaffirming in this way the possibilities that can be afforded by institutions, rather than undermining them? It is good to be reminded by artist Harun Morrison that institutions need not necessarily be imagined as stable and monolithic. Rather, we may recognize them as a confluence of flows,

continuously re-constituting themselves through legal systems, protocols, behaviors, finance; commandeering and networking with, other formal institutions. Seen as such perhaps this becomes one means to remain alert to the immense labour they exert and energies they extract to obscure their fragility. Fragility does not negate power, but points to the recurring cracks and glitches something small can slip through. (Morrison 2020)

Therein, as Morrison suggests, lies the capacity of institutions ‘to host informal, counter-institutions, brimming with destabilising potential’. Is a new politics possible, whereby we constantly find ways to continue to be and work with others, including large structures, whose cracks and glitches we use to introduce micro-shifts and destabilization? Would the mode of resistance then become irrelevant, and potentially unnecessary—or even, could we go as far to say, obsolete?

Imagine a process of working on actions as pure negation, while in a state of full passivity. Let us propose then a potential dramaturgical practice that works precisely in this way, through disengagement and refusal, withdrawal and negation. Dramaturgy here becomes the ultimate practice of subtracting, rather than adding anything to (the) work—or the world.

Echoing fugitivity, Morrison has written about the part-spider-part-man shapeshifting figure of Anansi, a West African and later on Caribbean mythopoetic creature. Anansi is said to steal and scheme and threaten the order by breaking the rules, which is also the only way to see that an order is in place. In this article, Morrison speculates on when and where one needs to become a spider, in the sense of taking on spider tactics that resonate with a less ocular and more vibratory and embodied way of seeing. He writes,

We can weave traps, but the web can also be a defensive tool. The spider can be social and collectivize when necessary. Although spiders have an affinity for corners and in-between spaces, they can be spotted on the ground, on a wall, or in the air suspended by an invisible thread. They operate on the ground as necessary, yet can also hover above it. To not-be-grounded can be essential for survival. To shape-shift is a cognitive act, a reimagining of the self and situation in unison. It is an understanding that this kind of mutability is not a rearrangement of cells, but in our surroundings and relationships. What we see, the spider feels; their awareness of the world is not primarily ocular but vibratory. To move through the world attuned to vibrations is also to see with one’s entire body. (Morrison 2020)

Re-think something you read in the previous page.

In her latest book *The Force of Non-violence*, Judith Butler (2020) makes the case for a way of living that consciously tries not to issue more violence into the world. Her argument relies heavily on the notion of interdependence. The task she describes involves not only acknowledging dependency as a condition of who we are (instead of aiming to overcome it aiming for self-sufficiency), but also 'affirming social and ecological interdependence' as a condition of equality (47). In her own words,

If we were to rethink ourselves as social creatures who are fundamentally dependent upon one another—and there's no shame, no humiliation, no 'feminization' in that—I think that we would treat each other differently, because our very conception of self would not be defined by individual self-interest. (Butler and Gessen 2020)

Only by understanding equality through this lens of interdependency then, might one be able to avoid releasing more violence into the world. Here, one is required to let go of 'the body as a "unit" in order to understand one's boundaries as relational and social predicaments: including sources of joy, susceptibility to violence, sensitivity to heat and cold' (Butler 2020: 45)—exposure to a virus, we could add.

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Winter is here and I have decided to wear my warmer coat. Last time I wore it was early March 2020 in Helsinki and I remember taking a long walk in that very coat in the city centre once you had left. It was a strange goodbye—we had been reading the news, wondering about different governments' approaches to lockdown measures and the idea of immunity, and were slowly coming to the realization that we will probably not meet again in person very soon.

Fast forward to October 2020 and of course we haven't met again in person. This time, as I put the coat on, it has become a symbol of past times, of a different kind of life, of a previous lifestyle. And how ironic, in the pocket I find a pair of gloves, your second pair of gloves, which you had lent me for the duration of our trip. Hands. Touch. Surfaces. Contagion. Contagious thought.

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