



Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity

Maija Hirvanen, Helsinki #7

By: Ida-Elisabeth Larsen

Months back, I think it was during the winter of 2013, Fanclub approached me upon receiving confirmation that a Nordic tour of their latest production DEATH would be possible to schedule. They explained to me that they were concerned about the current culture of touring, which to them felt somewhat depleted – presenting work, but not having time to establish an understanding of the different contexts and cities visited under such circumstances. Fanclub was interested in doing something different – something that would in one way or another engage, or at least to some extent make conversation, with the local communities of makers and audiences. So, with this in mind we worked together to develop a little side project called Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity.

We imagined it manifesting itself through three different initiatives; a series of talks, a series of interviews and a subsequent article. Firstly, the series of moderated talks – between Fanclub, myself, and whomever else would be interested in participating – would discuss openly the way Fanclub functioned as a collective and how they organised themselves in periods of producing stage works. Secondly, the series of interviews with local artist collectives discussing their works, methods, etc. And lastly, the formulation of a small article, which would further expand upon some of the ideas about collectivity discovered along the way.

This is an excerpt from an interview done in July, 2014 with Maija Hirvanen, a Finish choreographer based in Helsinki. I met Maija at the Full Moon Dance Festival located in the small city of Pyhäjärvi. We talked of traditions and assumptions connected to the collective form and of equality as a context specific notion that is always in negotiation when working with others in an artistic realm.

IE: How do you approach collective work within an artistic realm?

MH: Personally I've been interested in what kind of assumptions and associations come to the surface when you say the word 'collective' within the arts. There are various traditions connected to it and for me it has been really interesting testing how one can go about them.

IE: What kind of traditions are you thinking of here?

MH: For example there is the tradition deriving from the 60's, where the collective form is linked with the history of democracy and its ideals. In reality, a perfect exemplification of a decision making machinery where 1 man = 1 vote does not exist. It is not faultless. There are a lot of problems surrounding it, which we can question: What gets included and what is excluded? What kind of powers and responsibilities does it simultaneously produce and nurture.

I've been trying to resist the idea that collectives are about that rather simplistic understanding of equality (1 man = 1 vote) as a self-evident thing. It could be that it is so, but then again a collective way of working could also be something else.

IE: What other kind of approaches could you suggest?

MH: To work with the individual within the collective - or more precisely working with the idea of individual and the idea of collective simultaneously. Acknowledging the individuals that compose the collective together instead of focusing solely on the common, the consensus. It means trying to understand that equality is also an ideal that means very different things from context to context.

IE: How do you go about the notion of equality in your own processes?

MH: Well, the paradox of equality has been an ongoing interest for me whether I've been working with several or whether I've been working in a one-on-one situation. How is it that we construct and articulate the process of decision making when working with others? Do you start out of a conversation on how decisions will be made in your common process or was it defined already before hand? In practise I've been experimenting with how decision making can shift from one person to another in a more conscious manner and at the same time be collectively shared as a kind of artistic method.

IE: What does this practise of shifting the decision making allow, that you otherwise wouldn't experience?

MH: At first hand you might put everything you have into an initial idea, but in a collaboration the work changes through another's input, so it is necessary for you to let parts of your first vision go. Otherwise there is no collaboration. You go somewhere else than what you expect. For a while there might be situations where no one knows where an idea initially came from or where this doesn't matter. I've been interested in what kind of structures or strategies we can compose to let that happen. What if we didn't have the word "compromise"? You might have to let go of one idea, but then maybe that gives space for something else to come forward.

Whether you are looking at different structures for decision making or basic psychology between people or simply what core elements are needed in order to work in a collective manner, these are all different approaches or premises that will effect what is eventually produced.

IE: These methods of shifting the decision making from person to person have you ever worked with these as a premise for a bigger production?

MH: Yes, for instance we made the first edition of a city walk project called Walkapolis in the context of the Helsinki Festival 2013. We had two actors guiding the audience through two different types of routes in the centre of Helsinki, repeating each of the walks 12 times. I worked with the actors on a day-to-day folding collaboration, making the routes together. In addition to that I invited several international artists to make interventions along the routes, and that's where the collaborative space got really interesting. You can't control city spaces like you can control the theatre, so that was a constant premise that guided us through the decision making. Some of the visiting artists had worked a lot in contexts outside the white cube or black box, but for some it was completely new, so there were many different processes happening simultaneously between us and the work. I think one of the things that kept us working and the work coming together in a powerful and sensitive way, was the constant listening to where the decision making process was going and why, and how our ideas and practices were folding together in a new way.

IE: And how did this method effect the artistic work and its aesthetics?

MH: Both of the first Walkapolis walks in 2013 were very sensitive to the notion of "audience participation". Both of the walks had several "themes" layered and interacting, if you were looking for themes, and they had elements of surprise, intimacy and some risk in them. I think walking as a temporary collective, which became obvious in many of the group walks, was very well researched and built upon and I think all of this came through this "method" of collaborating, which was conscious, risk taking, and ongoing - but not fixed.

For more info on Maija Hirvanen see: www.hirvanen.net

For more info on Fanclub see: www.fanclubdance.com

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