

Winter Open Reading Group, 27 January 2018
Visitor report by Anik Fournier

If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution's reading group on social movement, the focus of our seventh biannual programme, departs from the following questions: how can ontologies of performance enable a better understanding of the workings and manifestations of social movements? How can an exploration of different forms of social movement help us to expand the vocabularies of performance studies? Reading across theoretical and artistic perspectives expands the field of investigation into social movement, which for our purpose is not reduced to its more common associations such as public manifestations of political action. Concrete inquiries into these wider implications emerging from the artist commissions and Performance in Residence projects for this programme have given rise to further questions: how do our bodies move socially? Are there distinct idioms of bodily movement? What are the histories of individual and collective social movement? What is the difference between the performativity of language and that of the body? Can we speak of social movement when no bodily movement is perceptible? During two open reading groups in 2018, we elaborate on the above with invited contributors as well as the public.

The first of these took place on 27 January 2018 at the If I Can't Dance offices, with a focus on three texts: Giorgio Agamben's "Movement" (2005); Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay's *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016); and Shannon Jackson's "Working Publics" (2011). We began with Agamben's text, which offers a philosophical and political historiography of the term 'movement' as identified with resistance to the establishment or 'stasis' of the state. Agamben draws on Hannah Arendt's observation of social movement as common to both the left and right, a key example being the Nazis' self-professed identification as being first a movement, and second, a party. Disturbingly, Nazi sympathizer Carl Schmitt theorized political movements in great detail. Agamben observes that movement is generally ascribed an autonomy, detached from the people as an entity acting of its own volition, and with the people acting in its shadow. He proposes returning to Aristotle's concept of kinetics, in which movement is articulated as a potential that cannot be predetermined nor ever come to a completion: "movement is the indefiniteness and imperfection of every politics."¹ Furthermore, he maintains that movement can never be external to the multitude of bodies that carry it.

We then turned to questions of affect in social movements in considering Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay's introduction to *Vulnerability in Resistance*. The theorists propose that vulnerability is a crucial site from which to rethink agency and social resistance in the present. From this premise, it is possible to "develop a different conception of embodiment and sociality within the fields of contemporary power"² – that is, vulnerability as the condition for resistance. The authors engage with feminist psychoanalytical theories on disavowal to explain the 'mastering' position in which one person or group denies their own vulnerability and projects it onto another person or group. Vulnerability in this light is not situated in bodies, but in the power structures that orchestrate their social relations.

¹ Agamben, Giorgio, "Movement," lecture given at Uni.Nomade in Seminar War and Democracy, March 8, 2005, Bove, Arianna (trans.), https://quepuedeuncuerpo.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/movement_giorgio_agamben.pdf.

² Butler, Judith, Gambetti, Zeynep, and Sabsay, Leticia, "Introduction," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Butler, J., Gambetti, Z., and Sabsay, L., Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2016, p. 6.

The authors want to re-contextualize this by thinking vulnerability and resistance together, replacing the neoliberal autonomous subject with a relational social being. In the process of doing so, however, they note the necessity to avoid normalizing processes of social transformation that occur through patriarchal protectionism: for instance, patronizing stances such as the “management of vulnerable populations” negate the possibility of the so-called “vulnerable” to act politically. The writers aim instead to articulate how “vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action”.³ The body’s exposure to power must be perceived as both perilous and enabling. The group discussion that emerged from this text focused on the notion of relational subjecthood. Participants offered personal examples of social actions in which they took part and spoke to how vulnerability can be felt as shared, becoming a source of affectation, meaning, that which sets things in motion.

The question of the relational subject was further opened up through our reading of Jackson’s “Social Works”. Jackson has been important to If I Can’t Dance’s research in her use of performance vocabularies and perspectives in dialogue with social movements and practices. Here the author highlights significant shifts the term “social” has undergone in recent years. Whereas it used to be linked to notions of welfare or human care, “as neoliberal concepts of subjectivity advocate models of autonomous personhood ‘free’ of such systems, the nature of the ‘social’ is itself debated territory”.⁴ She cautions against artists inadvertently embracing free subjectivity in an effort to affirm their own agency and autonomy outside of institutional systems, given their concurrent dependence on those same systems. Jackson upholds that it is far more interesting to affirm our non-autonomy as subjects and to find agency in reflecting on how we are entangled in various systems, especially those with supporting functions, and to negotiate those relations in new ways. Support, a keyword through which she links aesthetics and the social in her argument is “to bear, to hold up, to prop up”, that which supplies a living thing with its subsistence. “Support here”, she notes, “is not only ‘undermounted’ but also imagined in motion and as lateral relation”.⁵

In responding to this text, the reading group unpacked the term resistance and how it is used today. Artistic researcher, experimental performer, and body practitioner ELLE (elke van campenhout) noted that resistance is often assumed to be a progressive stance, even though many forms of resistance are inherently conservative, operating precisely to inhibit social change. Another participant noted how rethinking resistance could entail rethinking the figure of the artist who is constantly expected to individuate and define their artistic position through what it is not. To do so requires taking a stance of resistance toward other practices and institutional systems within the field of art. She questioned what the artist would look like today if expected to define their practices not in resistance to, but rather in relation or affinity with, the larger narrative of artistic practices and institutional forms. What if the focus was on what we move towards, and on that which we collectively invest?

³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴ Jackson, Shannon. “Working Publics,” *Performance Research*, Volume 16, Number 2, 2011, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

In the afternoon we moved to the choreography collective Jacuzzi's dance studio. ELLE closed the day by leading us through a series of embodied exercises to approach social movement from a somatic position using her ongoing research into Tantra. In response to the morning discussion, she chose to reopen the questions that arose around vulnerability, taking as one starting point Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay's query: "If the concept of vulnerability always operates within a tactical field, how do theoretical affirmations of vulnerability enter into that field?" ELLE structured the exercises toward investigating this proposition by working outward from the individual toward the collective. We began with breathing exercises that helped us sink into our bodies, find our sources of individual energy, and feel the vulnerability within the act of breathing. At several moments ELLE asked us to hold our breath, to not breathe, and to feel the limit of our living selves. Gradually, she began to have us open up to each other. This movement toward the other is the moment in which a feeling of relational vulnerability sets in. She began to work with this, having us connect to one another through the registers of collective breathing, touching, and modes of looking. At the end, we explored how the energy that emerged out of the group exercises could then be rechannelled to activate our individual movements in space.

What came out of the workshop, as discussed over drinks afterward, were varied degrees in which participants experienced the process, and the ease with which some of us sank into it. For some, working through the moment of vulnerability, of opening up, connecting, and tapping into the collective energy was effortless, while for others it was a struggle. Equally interesting was how the different modes of connecting, through breathing, touching, and looking, did not necessarily work in tandem or to reinforce one another. Rather, they were often experienced as disjunctive. Finally, the search for the relation between being an individual self-contained subject and a relational social being felt tenuous and slippery, always in negotiation.

If I Can't Dance's research into social movement through performance goes on, examining topologies of movement, from the history of culturally specific body languages to the terrain of what could be called the politics of movement. Which bodies can and cannot move through so-called social spaces? How are social spaces geared toward the movement of some (abled) bodies while physical or mentally disabling the movements of others? Following Jackson, what spaces, practices, and movements can be identified under the term social in the present? As Boris Ondreička noted in his introductory lecture to his Performance in Residence research on Rudolf von Laban, dance is one of the only realms where the intense touching between bodies is socially accepted. Why is this? The relation between individual bodies appears to be at the core of the politics, and aesthetics, of social movements. Paying heed to how those relations emerge and are inscribed seems to likewise be at the core of finding new ways to act and partake in what social movement can mean and become.

– Anik Fournier