

# Artistic collaboration and the promises of communalism

- a lecture by Rudi Laerman at Tanzquartier Vienna, 23/02/11 in connexion with the performance "Kollaborateure" by Lisa Hinterreithner, Valerie Oberleithner, Amanda Piña, Martina Ruhsam

I

We are in collaboration, 'now, here': *Ich bin eine Kollaborateur*. What does this actually mean? Is it possible to formulate a general theory of artistic collaboration? And may artistic collaboration perhaps be linked to a genuine political stance or outlook? These are the two main questions that must be tackled, 'now, here', in the time defining the performativity of any event. However, some preliminary remarks are appropriate.

*One:* if art comprises the many forms of critical work on, or of, representation that use the sensory as the prime medium, we can no longer restrict artistic collaboration to the sphere of so-called legitimate culture. Art, in the institutional sense, has indeed lost already for quite some time its former monopoly on values such as creativity or originality. The sphere of artistic production nowadays includes many instances of design, popular music or even tele-soap. Within the creative economy or culture industry, art – and by implication artistic collaboration – is an ever given chance, a potential that may be realized or, on the contrary, remains virtual.

*Two:* artistic collaboration is often a hybrid or mixed affair. The actual cooperation not only involves different sorts of art makers, in the strict sense, but also theoreticians, critics, curators or programmers, technicians,... not to forget the public. And if we are broadminded, for instance because we are acquainted with the work of Bruno Latour, we also include non-human collaborators such as laptops, props and lightning devices. However, this inclusive stance raises several conceptual and empirical problems. Let us therefore restrict the notion of artistic collaboration to the creative cooperation among human beings who are working together on something genuinely new, so on a product of whatever form or format whose final features they do not know in advance.

*Three:* artistic collaboration is everything but new. Artistic practices have indeed always relied on various forms of joint action. Quote: 'Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, "artists", who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence', thus sociologist Howard Becker rightly asserts. Romantic individualism made – and to a great extent still makes – the joint action within art worlds publicly invisible. In line with artistic fetishism, artworks are routinely attributed to singular authors, and this also within highly social genres of art production such as theatre or dance. We must critically resist this tendency, or at least be self-reflexive about the dubious blind spots that come with every individualization of art production.

*Four:* since the historical avant-garde, *reflexive* collaboration has become a widespread practice within art circles. Yet the logic of the avant-garde rather restricts explicit joint action to an ethics and politics of joint movement – of moving together along fixed lines in order to move things out of the hope of outdoing the modern separation between art and daily life. The public gathering or performance and the collective manifesto were therefore the principal media of collaboration within avant-garde movements, witness Dadaism or Surrealism. These days, reflexive collaboration is still primarily motivated by the anticipation of a possible future. However, the desired future vastly differs from the one envisaged by the avant-gardism. For artistic collaboration nowadays bets on the potentialities of cooperation itself: collaboration is always '*yet to come*'. It is moved by the *promise* of a genuine *social productivity*, mostly within the context of a singular project, that supersedes the traditional forms of labor division as well as a pure calculative or investment logic. The *hope* that a particular surplus value will emerge in a situation of collaboration presupposes both a relative equality among the participants and the existence of what Jacques Rancière calls 'a communism of the intellect'. Collaboration indeed assumes that 'I', 'you' and 'we' share a minimum of intelligence because we are cogent language users. This assumed equality underlies the promise that a productive social potential will be activated. Quote: 'the thinking of the collaborative (...) has a weakness, a weakness (in the sense of a preference) *for* the potentiality of the other/of otherness', thus Krassimira Kruschkova aptly remarks.

*Five (and last proviso):* The social potentiality that every collaboration selectively actualizes is no longer framed by the utopian longing for an harmonious togetherness or community. We are therefore in need of another word to circumscribe the stakes of contemporary forms of artistic collaboration. I propose to term the social potential activated by creative cooperation *the common*. To be in collaboration is to be part of a common and to bring forth a common. *Commonality* is therefore the name of the game we are into, 'now, here'.

## II

(Enough proviso's.) Let's try to delineate the basic contours of the commonality of artistic cooperation. I will again proceed point by point, without implying a hierarchy.

*One:* Artistic collaboration presumes the existence of a common, consisting of a series of generic capacities or potentials that are collaboratively put to work. Those who creatively cooperate can act together because they share generic human abilities to think, to feel, to speak, to move... For the 'I' or subject who thinks, feels, speaks or moves is always also an anonymous one: *one* thinks, feels, speaks or moves. Paolo Virno therefore rightly asserts that within creative immaterial labor, quote, 'the one is not a promise, it is a *premise*'. Unity is not collaboration's goal but its starting point. Due to education or training, the particular capacities that are networked within the context a specific project have of course always an individual nature. One for instance speaks or moves, and simultaneously there is an 'I' – a subject – that communicates or gestures. The activated generic abilities are, moreover, continually renewed outside the sphere of work. The potentials to move, to communicate, to experience or to think are indeed capacities that are constitutive for human life (or *bios*) as such. Following Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, we may therefore regard artistic collaboration as a form of biopolitical production.

Notwithstanding the individual differences among the networked capacities, biopolitical work premises a fundamental equality with regard to the potential productivity or richness of every collaborator's abilities. Personal differences are acknowledged, yet they are also framed by the generic commonality that is at work in every individual instantiation of the capacity to think, to communicate, or to affect and to be affected.

*Two:* Within creative cooperation, the activation of the generic common is driven by a *common cause*. It has mostly the form of a project that delineates questions and problems, which act as *common matters of concern* that frame the particular artistic collaboration and motivate the personal commitment of the involved participants. The common cause creates a common focus because it, rather paradoxically, functions as a producer of differences. Specific questions and problems need to be tackled, yet they receive various answers eliciting discussions, informing negotiations and – in the well-known last instance – necessitating collectively binding decisions. The common cause actualizes a potentiality of possible options or solutions, a diversity that vastly pluralizes the common activity, up to the point where it may threaten it. Artistic cooperation indeed time and again encapsulates relationships marked by rivalry, not to mention the sometimes destructive effects of narcissism. We must therefore define the creative cooperation's common as the unity of the difference between harmonious collaboration and inharmonious competition. In a word, cooperation equals '*co-opetition*'

*Three:* Artistic collaboration is motivated by the shared desire that the cooperation will be productive and yield an unimaginable richness. The participants 'invest', particularly from a libidinal point of view, in the ongoing common activity out of the hope that it is an ever renewed potential, a never drying up *potenza* that both empowers and unites. The sustainment of this desire, which can never be completely articulated discursively, asks for the regularly renewed experience of an effectively generated commonality, a genuine togetherness that actively nourishes and furthers the common cause through the play differences it produces. This commonality at once presupposes and brings forth mutual trust or, in the markedly Catholic vocabulary of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, 'love'. The common is indeed a fabric of trust – but trust is at the same time the fundamental condition of possibility of the common. Trust indeed resembles a so-called strange loop: it comes into existence because its existence is presupposed. Moreover, trust not only follows the logic of a self-fulfilling prophecy but also acts as a self-propelling mechanism. Confirmed trust generates more trust, yet this accumulative 'trust cycle' remains at every moment a highly vulnerable social performance. One contingent experience of distrust by one

participant may destroy the minimum of mutual trust every commonality requires. One trusts, or one distrusts – and there's not much in-between.

*Four:* The commonality that is continuously reproduced through shared acts of communication, thinking or feeling exceeds and transforms the subject-nature of the participating individuals. An individual subject is per definition autonomous : the individual finds its *subjectum* or ground (or literally: its supporting surface) in itself. Within the experience of commonality, the common acts as the principal subject, and this in a double sense. On the one hand, the intensive communication among the participants forms the motor of an exchange that rapidly acquires the status of an autonomous social machine that is feeding every involved individual because she co-feds it. This is the common as a constantly renewed realm of verbal and non-verbal communicative richness. On the other hand, every participant's potentials to think, feel or communicate, which define the generic common any creative commonality must assume, are restlessly singularized by the activity of collaboration. Again and again, a new thought, another feeling or a different possible communicative contribution emerges. These singularities happen, 'now, here', because of a togetherness happening 'now, here'. They are contingently created through the interplay of the generic common shared by all participants and the momentary communicative common it produces. This is the common as, dixit Antonio Negri, 'a multiplicity of singularizations'.

*Five:* The commonality brought forth in collaborative praxis is a matrix for *social reflexivity* – for discussion and critique, so for discursive negotiation and explicit argumentation. The main question this reflexivity addresses pertains to the actual *value* of the meanwhile produced artifacts. 'Is this worthy?' – this question again and again crops up during creative collaborations. Does for instance the just proposed series of movements – we are indeed in the midst of the preparation of a dance performance – is worth to be shown to a public or at least possesses qualities that can be build on and productively developed? Different answers will be given because various value registers or regimes of justification may be deployed. The seen movements can be evaluated as original, conceptually or artistically interesting, testifying of a rare sort of physical courage, prickling the expected public, and so on. Artistic collaboration incessantly transforms the produced togetherness in a *reflexive*

*value community*, one that has to decide through a discussion lacking certain standards or a binding poetics on the common worth of particular contributions. Creative cooperation is constantly in need of a common vocabulary or common sense that it has to create through collaboration. It is driven by a common wealth, generated through the constant singularization of generic capacities; and it hopes for a common wealth, consisting of a temporarily fixed product that may inspire other artistic collaborations. 'What is produced together will produce a public togetherness that may inform future forms of producing together', thus states the prime rule synthesizing the basic ethics of commonalism.

*Six*: Every instance of artistic collaboration resembles a self-organizing 'common wealth' in the political sense, so a self-deciding republic. Again and again, collectively binding decisions have to be taken collectively 'beyond representation', without representatives or delegates. How to organize work? What has value? How to agree? These and many other questions necessitate often instant answers that inform *the politics of commonalism*, the transformation of a productive common into a collectivity deciding on the organization, valuation and final outcomes of its productivity. This politics is structurally framed by the possibility of dissensus, opposition, non-agreement, not to mention the eventuality of individual exit. Discords are the test of every artistic collaboration and place it in the realm of the political. For the political always involves a *differend*, a difference that turns into a disagreement that must be resolved but cannot be disentangled or decided upon without a minimum of 'doing harm to someone'. According to the infamous Carl Schmitt, the political therefore implies an irresolvable opposition between friends and enemies. The politics of commonalism bets on the possibility to avoid this antagonism and to change disagreements into agreements between agonists. How the latter are effectively produced is a local matter that vastly depends on *the political imagination* emerging within every artistic collaboration. Any creative cooperation is a contingent experiment in democratizing democracy.

### III

Artistic collaboration anticipates a democracy yet to come whose name is not communism but commonalism. It both insists on and inspires a politics that by all

possible means tries to further the chances of self-organizing commons, whatever their nature and whatever their concrete manifestations. Or as Jean-Luc Nancy notes in his essay 'Communism, the word': 'how can we think about society, government, law, not with the aim of achieving (...) the common, but only in the hope of letting it come and taking its own chance, its own possibility of making sense?'. This is for sure not a plea for anarchism, quite the contrary. At stake is the possibility of a *hybrid politics or mixed constitution* that is build on three principal axes.

*One*: common goods, or 'commonalities', constitute a third category besides private commodities and public, or stately organized, products and services.

*Two*: the public sector should be organized as much as possible according to the logic of commonalism.

*Three*: representative democracy, technocracy or administration, and the democracy of the common are balanced on every level of governance.

To elaborate, refine and supplement these three principles is an urgent common task. Commonalism is per definition a common performance, fuelled by a performativity anticipating that which it longs for.

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