



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

UNNAMED AUTOFICTIONS, DISSONANT CO-LABOURING: A PREFACE

CO-LABOURING

Autofiction:

I search in my inbox for the word “collaboration”. The results are endless. A staff update informs me that “The Partnerships and Business Engagement Team has launched a new Innovation Seedcorn Funding Scheme with the aim of supporting business and academic collaborations that are innovative and have commercial potential or the ability to grow business networks”. A colleague reminds students that the focus of this week’s session is “collaboration” and that she is sorry she can’t be there with them but that a colleague has kindly agreed to cover for her. A meeting invite suggests we will discuss potential events/collaborations we may want to develop around our chosen theme. A prospective PhD student sends a project proposal and a CV, which includes a list of selected collaborations. A call for proposals invites contributions to a conference which “creates international, multicultural and multidisciplinary platforms for exchange and collaboration between academics, performing artists, arts managers, producers, musicians, designers and teachers”. Collaboration is everywhere; it is productive; it is attractive; it is potentially profitable; it generates exciting public events; it is taught to students; it is listed on CVs.

In what ways do the current systems and ecologies we are embedded within think and weaponise collaboration?

Autofiction:

The students clearly enjoy this opportunity to express their frustration. It threatens me. I lose control of the seminar. The presentation that was supposed to happen doesn't. At one point I ask the students if they think this is my fault. They laugh at me. I tell them it feels that way. They tell me in so many words that it isn't me they are really talking to here and it isn't really me that they care about. They are having this conversation as a group of young people frustrated at the material conditions that face them when they leave university. My attempts to circle back to the assessment, to give them the key terms, to provide them with the ability to critique, are all met with the very embodied difficulty of the problems we are here to discuss.

Are we doing what we are supposed to be doing?

Autofiction:

I listen to Niko G x Kali and think about techno-witches. I raise a complaint for a colleague. I listen to other exhausted colleagues. I am disappointed we did not ballot to strike but committed to try again. I celebrate successes at my friend's branch, where a nearly four-year fight has finally yielded some material changes. I answer more messages about holding workshops at the border. I reassure my grandmother about iodine tablets. I cough. I feel overwhelmed. I open a draft document for an application on commons-building and laugh at my own inability to articulate the value of commons in the framework of a network application. I read my friend's posting about their experience under democratic confederalism in Rojava, "a form of libertarian socialism based on decentralised, stateless governance, gender equality, cooperative labour, ecology and direct democracy" they mention Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan (2017). I open an unfinished chapter for my overdue book and make another note next to criticism and colonial logic. I receive a notification about high air pollution warning. I manage some childcare arrangements for the spring break. I take my child swimming and check on the SEN report. I draw with my child a map of London in the seventeenth century. I read about the case for reparations and antifascism. I sit with writings on strikes and endnotes.

Is this the work?

Addressing co-labouring through anonymous autofiction (our strategy to enable a creative and critical mode more incisive than critique by itself) upends the productive capacity of collaboration. Work stops. This is a methodological Bermuda triangle. We are drawn into a zone where because the work is discussing the work, there is in one way no work. I want to suggest that this is an unintentional feature, not bug, of our process. I am, after all, still writing or talking. You are, after all, still reading or listening. In this moment of communication we might experience the Bermuda triangle of counter-production in a positive sense, as the experience of being somewhere within the walls of a problem, or, physically in the hole of the Bermuda triangle and once we get there we find out it is just a street and some buildings. Things here might look super similar to things back in the non-Bermuda triangle. The difference is that we had the opportunity of divergence. We are in the time of a problem before the sentence has been fully uttered. I am saying that I do not know what happens next.

I have felt it was possible, within reach, to produce what we were being invited to produce—and I propose that this may also have been a shared feeling. So this thing that our contribution is—or will be, or may be—is both elusive and achievable, both unknown (ungraspable) and recognisable (felt). Reading Ann Cvetkovich (2012), we acknowledge the familiarity of what she describes as the “impossible conditions” of academic work, the mismatch between the commitment to intellectual work and the structures that shape it and validate it only insofar as it is identified as productive.

How do I collaborate in this environment?

So, we are stuck—while also knowing how we might feel our way. As a (key) group, we have taken as a starting point that we share an investment in (co-)developing ways of working together that offer something different from critical thought and writing. In a way, the invitation (and our act of accepting it) initiated a process that has been shaped by impasse as much as by activity. Throughout the process, we have felt a shared sense of awkwardness in relation to the task, and discussing this has been part of the work. More intimately, in our own separate ways of working, the task may have provoked feelings of uncertainty, frustration, inadequacy.

What is foregrounded through the provocation of thinking not about collaboration, but co-labouring? Our Key Group began with the provocation of engaging with the politics of co-labouring, and amidst the tumultuous and sometimes disparate experiences framed by the past year, we have come to dwell with the dissonance of intersecting labour structures—structures of thought, structures of collaboration, and institutional structures of relation. Our attention towards the inevitable consequences of collaboration has, in fact, made evident the ways in which the institutionalisation and professionalisation of certain relations and modes of work in the academy and in artistic practice have obscured the assumptions about the kinds of co-labouring we undertake when we do our work, together. What does it mean to co-labour in research, in pedagogy, and in the administrative and managerial interstices of institutional life?

How do we collaborate?

What shifts in the articulation of plurality?

We opt to bring in what is often left out of the picture: the invisible labour that does not make it into conference papers, peer-reviewed articles, grant applications—but without which none of the products that make us who we are seen as would exist. We want to bring in the everyday, the anecdotal, from both the institutional and the domestic sphere. Because while we co-labour to produce a piece of writing, we also run applicants' days at our institutions, book childcare for school half-term breaks, take our pets to the vet, attend compulsory training on changes to assessment boards, have video calls with families overseas. There is no collaborative output that is not entangled with all of this.

In our initial provocation, we spoke about collaboration as a consensual form of working practice shaped by sharing and discovery; the constant forming and un-forming of our Key Group has been entirely shaped by the wildly unpredictable capacities of those we were, and continue to be, in conversation with, thinking alongside. It has also been shaped by our experiences navigating the kinds of forms of invisible labour our institutions often demand without surfacing, and the forms of labour that uphold our lives beyond them. "Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty", says Paul B. Preciado in *ArtForum*, "and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take" (2020). We cannot talk about collaboration without talking about community. And we cannot talk about community without making explicit that which is systemically normalised.

In part, one of the negotiations of forming our Key Group has been undertaking the process of determining our connections and communities, where they intersect and where they diffract. Our Key Group is not only ourselves. Our Performance Philosophy-appointed mentors both asked challenging questions that were again part of the work. The conference planning team informed us that our Key Group work may form the basis for new structures of engagement in Performance Philosophy. Our experimentation is folded into multiple contexts. How to understand the directionality of our dialogue? Will what we say move across, or upwards, or filter anywhere else? We can only imagine further encounters with the poetics of working together. We do not yet know ourselves in this work, because we are aware that the multiple forces that act on our co-labouring will in-effect anonymise our contributions. Sometimes we become institutions the more we listen without responsibility. Because the dissonance of our co-labouring is also the pleasure of kinship.

We have been invited through our capacity as co-convenors, where we organise other researchers to speak to each other and often share none of our own. Our Key Group is a trio of receptors. We are here to hear others. This too becomes a creative problem for us. How can we lead a discussion and listen at the same time? If we do not speak first, will there only be silence? Will that silence be horror or relief? As a Key Group we were asked to come up with a keyword to be used as a nickname for conference planning purposes. We chose co-labouring. The word divides up collaboration into something multiple. It is an ongoing work together without a sense of totality.

What is in fact, held by language?

It is an open time that exceeds the “projected temporality” that Bojana Kunst explains as a mode of collaboration in which the only creative work that can receive funding is that which is already conceivable within the terms of the past. This is a stopper on experimentation (2012). The time of our work spills out past the working day’s nine to five. Our work also started before and will outlast the conference planning activities. The conference committee’s invitation has been to consider our negotiation of the practicalities of working as a Key Group to be part of our presentation. Our Key Group presentation will not be an ending. Our work as a Key Group is a flash point in a practice with a less measurable set of scales. It is clear that our working is our practice.

We were concerned about repeating the tempting errors of “proceduralism”, Bojana Cvejić’s notion that describes the mystification of political action in service of self-reflexivity (2013). In this way we are interested in not-working as a mode of resistance. By not-work we mean the labour that escapes visibility, both in terms of what must be done in addition to the contract as well as the truly creative and critical entanglements that transcend the measuring systems of contemporary knowledge production. Like co-labouring, not-work has the potential to replace the mechanical/digital reproduction of knowledge with equitable relationships of exchange. Still we must not not-work for the sake of resisting the fetishised individualism concealed by collaboration. And yet we are willing to not-work as work if it means the co-labouring becomes a form of survival by means of togetherness. The not-working happens in a context of political action, where colleagues across the country at some universities are on strike. The Performance Philosophy conference planners were curious to hear more about these localised national issues of our work. Our dispassion for procedures is expressed in our unwillingness to make visible the personal politics that too often obscure collective possibilities.

At work, when is a problem between two parties an ending?

What has our collaboration been? Before (after) I can think about this, I want to think about its temporality, its temporalities. Mainly because it feels like an impossible task, but it also feels crucial to the task of making sense of the work in order to make it visible for others—which I sense on some level is (ought to be) the purpose of this text. It began with the invitation to contribute. But that in a way is only a convenient beginning: an abrupt point of departure which needs to be identified in order to make the work exist as nameable, as shareable. Yet the prompt in itself invoked a set of practices that pre-existed the invitation and its acceptance. By identifying us as a Key Group, the invitation alluded to work—group work—that predated it. It acted as a beginning that presupposed the work had already begun. And so we continued and/as we began, in a fashion that both accepted and denied its own point of departure. In a fashion that embraced a messy, non-linear temporality, while also accepting a timeline, a series of deadlines by which work, specific work, had to be produced. Processes of co-labouring always seem to hold these multiple temporalities—the linear, imperative one, and the queer and messy adjacencies.

Works Cited

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Biography

The Key Group on Co-labouring is made up of Diana Damian Martin, Daniela Perazzo, and Nik Wakefield. They are working group co-convenors in the UK-based Theatre and Performance Research Association.

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