

# Musings on Collectivity

## Reflexões sobre a Coletividade

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### ABSTRACT

This article ponders how a *collective* is defined today, offering explanations, which range from the generic to the personal, although in both cases this formation depends on discovering mutual interests and laying out common ground. There are sometimes elusive reasons for why and how collectives are formed. Many social groupings are founded on subtle political, social and economic associations as well as engaging in direct or indirect hegemonies that aim at shaping a group's organization as well as determining its duration.

Keywords: Collectives. Dance. Politics of control.

### RESUMO

*Este artigo pondera sobre como um coletivo é definido hoje, oferecendo explicações que vão desde o genérico ao pessoal, embora em ambos casos isso dependa de descobrir interesses mútuos e estabelecer um terreno comum. Às vezes há razões evasivas para o porquê e como coletivos são formados. Muitos grupos sociais são fundados em sutis associações políticas, sociais e econômicas, bem como envolvidos em hegemonias diretas ou indiretas que visam a moldar a organização de um grupo, bem como determinar a sua duração.*

*Palavras-chave: Coletividade. Dança. Política de controle.*

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Collectives are a common element in today's artistic environment. What ordinarily unites a group of people is a common or mutual interest, sometimes cooperative, and usually collaborative. Considering the extensive territory of contemporary dance, which for several years has become a meeting place for embracing and integrating many diversified areas – artistic or non-artistic, I wish to begin by relating a recent observation, which may define the tone of this paper. Dance has become so diversified and such a marketable product that its training venue has abandoned its customary objective, that of exclusively training bodies who aspire to become dancers, in search of a broader public. But is it this simple? Let me explain.

In New York there are a series of dance establishments in which there is a remarkable criterion for entering the classroom. You come, you pay, and you dance. There are no auditions or a selective process that determine whether or not you are eligible for the level of difficulty that is advertised. An intermediate level ballet class, at least in the way I have understood it, meant that you had at least 5 years of classical ballet training and could execute certain steps, perform an intermediate level of complex sequences in addition to understanding and demonstrating musical phrasing. It did not determine or qualify artistic or personal expression. Nowadays this seemingly democratic exercise of embracing simply the desire and delight to dance, and having the financial means of doing so, has determined who enters through those “sacred doors” of Terpsichore (one of the 9 muses of music and ballet, who by the way is depicted as *sitting down* holding her lyre). The students I observed entering the classroom were a motley assortment, varying from professional dancers who are active performers, aspiring performers, veteran dancers who continue to train either for personal pleasure or are involved in other kinds of artistic projects, and an unusual group of people, ranging from people in wheel chairs, people without limbs or those that have difficulty walking. Remarkably it appeared as a cohesive colony of bodies, and although I didn't question the merit I pondered on how the teacher and the students entering the classroom were so casual about the glaring dissimilarities and the objectives that were so ostensibly distinctive and singular. But no one judged or questioned the right for the other body to share the class space. It was worth paying just to see how easily everyone worked together and accepted the diversity. The common goal here was ballet, and each participant accepted the other's particular interest, be it perfecting technical ability, building a relationship with classical music, testing physical limits regardless of level,

difficulties or impairments or just being among those who love the art form. My question is this: Is this broader public a mark of our times, that is, a conscious effort to allow accessibility to a higher art form, thus supporting the idea of inclusion of the physically handicapped in an art form that is generally evaluated by its perfection? Or maybe it is a throwback to moments in history where questioning what is dance and who can dance was a determining factor in widening opinions and shaping the politics in the dance community.

By relating my own experience with a performing group for over 20 years I am able to observe how issues and hierarchies within my group changed during this period. This also included my opinion about who, where and how we danced. The premise that an artist is never separated from his times held fast in several distinct moments when I recognized that certain procedures needed rethinking because the contexts had changed. The sanctioning of the performer and the co-authorship of a work came at a moment when my methods and creative process were being questioned by the dancers who began to see their roles differently. It was *their* work, *their* ingenuity that was in the balance, and they wanted the credit. Maybe I always worked this way, giving space for the performer to come up with his/her own solution to a sequence of movement or an ending of a piece. The difference was now they wanted to share the bill. I was now designated as the Director, not the Choreographer. This was a survival tool; accept the new politics of creating dance, or fall into oblivion by hanging on to old assumptions about who was in command. “Me choreographer – you dancer”.

On the other hand the transformation of choreographer to director had an opposite twist. The way I saw it the new role of performer/creator had a load of responsibilities attached to his new position and this was an adjustment that was hard to swallow. The dancer had to work and produce on his own, and assume authorship for it. He was confused. He was having a hard time adjusting and couldn't make decisions, which affected the work's outcome. “What do *you* want to do here, and what do *you* want to say?” I said. He replied, “What we need here is a choreographer!”

I understood. The beginning of any readjustment causes an estrangement with unfamiliar practices and circumstances. Human beings, normally, do not choose to enter into crisis, although crisis may produce change, requires adaptation and acceptance, and provides opportunity to recognize new possibilities. The hierarchies were forsaking their vertical planes where the choreographer was the all and powerful, and building horizontal ones, which meant that everything

was becoming decentralized with no person or element more important than any other. Hegemonies changed. Functions within a group were reorganized and little by little the dread of the dancer assuming the responsibility of creative authorship was transferred to that of sharing or assuming total control of an artistic product. That is everything from idea, movement, lighting, spatial conception, production and publicity and marketing.

Ten years later, after launching the new position of performer/creator, the dancer/artist has established himself within this new setting: as complete author of his art. This has strengthened his role as a singular artist within a community of independent groups, which have sprung out of the desire to develop individual qualities and identities. There is still a need for adjustments since an apparent notion of equality with one's colleague or contemporary is a provocative and competitive one. By lacking a director or having several directors the dispute is whose idea is better, and who gets the credit. How we learn to listen to one another is a humbling experience and should not impede the joy of accomplishing tasks together. Still, the common goal is the most important factor here and one, which accepts, clarifies and embraces the existence of other bodies and ideas within a group. One learns how to listen as well as to speak; one learns when to move and when to stay still. Neither activity takes away from the other.

The social order of a culture importantly becomes a pre-determinate of creation, a contextual shaper that lures the dancer into rethinking old models of creating dance. New ways of organizing and grouping people and ideas are not just based on aesthetics but social conditions are determinate factors that enter into group dance composition.

What I am calling "choreography" is not just a way of thinking about social order; it has also been a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics; in other words, as a performative, choreography cannot simply be identified with the "aesthetic" and set in opposition to the category of "the political" that it either tropes or predetermines (HEWITT, 2005, p. 11).

Hewitt also discusses the emergence of a collective when first applying socially directed tasks. For example he relates that in the construction of Jacob's Pillow, an annual summer dance venue in the United States, the founder, Ted Shawn, used his all-male dance group as the labor force in clearing the space, building their home and dance space and so forth. The shared chores became part of the group's daily goals as well as dancing and as such unified the group on more indirect levels.

Another consideration of collective behavior I would like to

mention is the kind of attentiveness I learned from working and performing in the street. In terms of authorship, the street pertains to everyone and to no one, so there is no real hierarchy if we think in terms of our measuring our actions during a daily routine, like crossing a plaza at lunchtime, or traveling the same path to work everyday. There is a kind of pedestrian organization and everyone accepts and respects this behavior as long as it does not impinge on another's personal space and routine. When an artist uses the street as his performing space he needs to understand how people identify with the place, its general use and the potential of this space. He must try and join with the space by conveying respect for the people who daily occupy this space as well as the objects within it. The subjects (the spectators) and objects (the architecture) may appear to have an intimate connection with the artist, if he is successful. There is an unspoken permission that forms between the artist and his urban settings, for in order to belong to a collective space, and I include the objects and passerby, one must earn his right to be there. In these settings the artist cannot sell himself as elite, someone with exclusive rights to a place and where pedestrians are obligated to step aside and watch him perform. Also, there is no correct or erroneous movement, no traditional position while watching a street performance, since a spectator can come and go as he pleases, and urban spaces have no mirrors. The street, with so many rhythms, sounds and movements, intervening and colliding into each other, continue to stay culturally and socially connected and removed from conventional expectations felt in a theatrical setting. A street presentation allows a public the freedom to watch or not, and it's free of charge. The whole experience becomes a kind of open collective, cooperating on indirect social levels.

Our bodies reconstruct themselves: a collective body is derived from the idea that many potential bodies exist in a single body. This consciousness is a conceptual experience, but similar to the chorus of the dance the 1930s. The invisible line that holds a group together is connected through movement (CAVRELL, 2015, translated from Portuguese, p. 220).

It is no wonder why the street has become such a powerful venue recently. The body is a culmination of many voices, many influences connecting on several levels at the same time. It innately carries its social, political and cultural connectedness, and architecturally it gives us clues as to what is important and what is not so important. What we should or shouldn't see. A political manifestation carries with it the omnipotence of the building, which is occupied during a demonstration. Protest

marches also indirectly include/incorporate the individual buildings that they pass, which symbolically carry images of political, social and economic power. The large quantity of bodies is empowering especially when rallying behind a cause or a belief that carries the feelings and the spirit of the experience shared, not divided. A common credence is encouraged and not individual expression. Smelser discusses collective behavior as a “compressed way” of approaching problems and finding solutions in a society and as a rebuilding of some constituent of social action (SMELSER, 2011).

Returning to the first page of this article, a dance classroom is recognizably also a place of social encounter and activity, a recognizable common ground, a social space and a place for the sharing and the feeling of art as a group experience. It is not solely about the dancer’s singular expression, although that is happening, but more about how *my* movement, imperfect as it is, is a powerful manifestation of a collective striving to *become* perfect. The effort is the uniting factor, for during those 90 minutes the bodies become a mass of energy and of presence regardless of their level of performance.

This brings us to ponder why people form dance collectives. Some groups want to be able to obtain artistic freedom and have similar ideas about ways to create art and economic stability. How these groups assemble, as mentioned, depend a lot on the social and cultural context. Nevertheless we are talking about the fact that in the performing arts we are forever a community of different bodies whose lives are sometimes attracted or repelled by the same ideologies. With collective grouping there is always a common denominator, one that escapes dissimilarities and catches perceptible similarities. Social movements search for an identity in order to gain strength and control and are motivated internally and, as such, act together. Susan Foster tells us “performances stress a state of kinesthetic empathy with the collective body of others’ bodies” (FOSTER, 1966, p. 64). Although methods and actions can be internally negotiable within the collective, outsiders see only a whole and articulate identity. Without delving too deeply into the psychology of social networks and the need for connectivity through acceptance of different agencies, (a common one being how many likes one receives for a post in Facebook), I suggest that having a different opinion from the consensus of the prominent group is above all far more terrifying than conformity. The fear of being left out and not adapting to a current model creates anxiety and encourages compliance and dependency. But is this a bad thing? Isn’t reinforced socially collective behavior also creating unity in response to difference in addition to fostering commitment

and a sense of belonging? Returning to the open ballet class, I would say the communal experience the students have together is positive and supportive on this level, although certainly challenging for the teacher. Specifically because this action, that of accepting students into the class without any type of selection or criterion other than being able to pay, sustains the belief that embracing differences ideologically is also cultivating one's indifference to difference.

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