

# Something "more creative"

**Presented at: Approaches to social transformation through the arts, Kingston University, 10th March 2023**

## **Two anecdotes**

In 2021, I was part of a group of students at the University of Roehampton who were protesting our senior management's decision to undertake mass redundancies across its academic staff.<sup>1</sup> We were at one of our weekly meetings, planning various activities: contacting press, trying to hold the student union to account, trying to rally the student body. And then one of us spoke up to interrupt all this. He noted that most of us were artists and performers, and asked why we were spending all of our time with these kinds of actions, and not something "more creative", that could use the power of art to challenge, protest, resist.

Around the same time, I was at a talk organised by Dance Art Foundation, that sought to make a case for the leadership of professional artists within funding and commissioning organisations.<sup>2</sup> One of the speakers was the artist Quinsy Gario – a key figure in the protests against Zwarte Piet, "Black Pete", the racist tradition of blackface in The Netherlands. Gario was describing how this project has increasingly led him into activist spaces and collective organising, and that this produced a crisis for him: "I didn't know what my role was in these spaces. I'm an artist: I'm good at disruption and asking questions."

I wanted to share these anecdotes here, because they evoke a common understanding of the relationship between "creativity", the figure of the artist, and resistance – at least in the Global North – that seems to have caused trouble in these two situations in which people were working towards social and political change. The thinking I'm going to share today will be circling around a particular line from the text that frames this event – about the "intrinsic subversive potential" of creative practice, and its ability to "question, interrupt and transform dominant social and economic narratives and systems".<sup>3</sup>

## **Artists, disorganisation, derangement, tethering**

The first anecdote I shared suggests that it is inherently better, or least more politically potent, for something to be 'artistic' or 'creative'. And that as artists, we have a responsibility to exceed conventional forms of planning and action. And the second anecdote goes further, to suggest that art and creativity might be fundamentally opposed to any kind of organising

practice.

Together they depict 'the artist' and 'the creative process' as forces of disruption, instability, subversion, wildness and incoherence. The artist is a trickster-genius; someone who operates through illogical and anti-rational processes; a disorganised and disorganising figure who brings disruption to bear on any structure or agreement.

And this cliché is completely ridiculous – it's very easy to find many examples of artists thoroughly engaged in collective, organised and administrative processes – yet nonetheless recurs in both popular and specialised conceptions of the artist.<sup>4</sup> I think of Sister Sledge's 1979 disco track 'Lost in Music':

We're lost in music, Caught in a trap, No turnin' back. [...] We're lost in music, Feel so alive, I quit my nine to five. [...] Responsibility, To me is a tragedy, I'll get a job some other time.<sup>5</sup>

And to consider this, I want to turn to Sean Bonney's discussion of the nineteenth century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, and Rimbaud's line about poetry being the 'derangement of the senses':

Rimbaud hammered out his poetic programme in May 1871, the week before the Paris Communards were slaughtered. He wanted to be there, he kept saying it. The 'long systematic derangement of the senses' [...] He's talking about the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity, yeh? That's clear, yeh? That's his claim for the poetic imagination, that's his idea of what poetic labour is. Obviously you could read that as a simple recipe for personal excess, but only from the perspective of police reality.<sup>6</sup>

I read Bonney here as insisting that art's capacity for derangement, disorganisation, disorientation is not generative in itself, but only when connected to an actual politics; even if, as in Bonney or Rimbaud's case, that politics might be demanding a very fundamental rethinking of what we mean by the individual, the relational, the social, the civic, or indeed, the political.

So my immediate response to Sister Sledge would be: great, ditch the 9-5, but I'm less sure about this general disavowal of responsibility. If 'responsibility' just means bourgeois respectability, then dump it; but I still think it might be an important concept in how we show up to our social and political relations. But it's tricky. What they might be calling for is precisely this granular rethinking of the social and political – that might include a regard of disco as not as 'escape', but a very specific and privileged site in which those things take place. And this is the kind of enquiry that I think Fred Moten is doing in his critique of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

It's not always obvious or possible to determine whether a 'deranging' artistic practice might be tethered to or fully removed from such a political project. But I think a good example of

such a distinction can be felt in the music critic Harmony Holiday's description of Amiri Baraka, and his transition in the 1960s from “the disaffected hipsterism of a token black beat poet, to the unabashed militancy of a black avant-garde revolutionary.”<sup>8</sup>

And I think this distinction is significant if we were to consider the meeting point of various discourses we might be carrying into this room<sup>9</sup>; between, say, the experimental choreographer Deborah Hay saying “It’s not why I dance, it’s that I dance, and that is political”<sup>10</sup>, and a line that I know that Season Butler has been working with: “Being weird is not enough.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Indeterminacy and abuse**

To speak of the “intrinsic subversive potential of art” implies some kind of innate or generic capacity. Suhail Malik, a theorist at Goldsmiths, is doubtful about any such claim; not because it's not true, but because of how it is bound up with the “indeterminacy of art”<sup>12</sup>, which he insists is the defining feature of contemporary visual arts. He argues that this indeterminacy makes art feel like it has such a radical potential, but is precisely what makes art so available to abuses of power, both internal and external to the field.

And, for example, some of these external abuses would be how art can very frequently makes itself available to processes of gentrification, state-building, or all the very questionable neo-colonial operations of UK universities.<sup>13</sup>

And to consider more internal abuses within the field of art, we could return to the Sean Bonney text from earlier, and continue the quote from where I left off:

In the enemy language it is necessary to lie. & seeing as language is probably the chief of the social senses, we have to derange that. But how do we get to that without turning into lame-assed conceptualists trying to get jiggy with their students. You know what, and who, I mean.<sup>14</sup>

For context: over the past couple of years, I've been working on the legacy of the theatre-maker Chris Goode. I would argue that he is one many figures whose rhetoric around artistic experimentation was key in sustaining and legitimising working practices that were saturated in grooming and sexual abuse.<sup>15</sup>

As such, I'm with Sean Bonney and Suhail Malik here: rather than claiming ‘creativity’ is necessarily liberatory or progressive *in general*, as some innate quality, I would suggest that each instance needs to be considered in its own context, and according to an actual politics. How does it arise and what is it responding to? What does it enable or disable, and for who? What it is subverting? What is it reliant upon, and leaving intact?

As so, to offer a much delayed reply to my fellow student organiser who asked us to do something “more creative”, I would say: sure, have you got anything in particular you're

thinking of? Let's discuss the pros and cons of that action, like we do anything else. But if the main reason for undertaking such an action is to massage our egos by ensuring that everyone keeps thinking of us as 'artists' – and that that positioning has no particular strategic value in this case (e.g. accessing certain institutional platforms, etc.) – than I am not particularly interested.

### **Commitment to the unjustifiable**

I want to clarify two things: firstly, that all this discussion is just one of many possible models of what it means to be an artist<sup>16</sup> – we could equally think of artist as community organiser, or folk practitioner, or specialist manufacturer of luxury goods. None are inherently true. People will invoke or reject whichever model will help them garner the permissions and approval they need, e.g. presenting themselves as a legitimate and trustworthy businessperson or getting away with making certain provocations; or avoiding certain kinds of administrative labour.

Secondly, I am not suggesting that an artist being tethered to a politics necessitates a particularly closely or faithful relation; that their artwork operate as propaganda. The role of the artist in relation to that political movement can be parallel, misaligned, inconvenient, out of sync. This is why I'm more interested in the term 'tethered' than, for example, 'grounded'. It gives permission for many different kinds of orientation and distance.

One of the key complexities within all this is how the value of our work is rarely known in advance. Creative practice, or least the way that I work, often operates through errancy and perversion: uses of time, attention and resource that necessitate what I often describe as a commitment to the unjustifiable – something I think is evoked in an exchange between writer John Berger and novelist Michael Ondaatje:

Berger: Are you withdrawing to yourself or to somewhere else? Tell me about the place where you find yourself when you withdraw. Is it here? Is it there?

Ondaatje: I don't think it's withdrawing. It's more like descending, in the sense that I'm trying to descend to a level that I haven't gone before. If I began to write something that I already knew, it would be a problem for me. I'm trying to accept the given of what I know and then write something that I don't know. And that's why that privacy, that secrecy, which I'm obsessed with, is necessary. It becomes discovery as opposed to clarification.<sup>17</sup>

The errancy that I'm talking about here is *not* me setting out to make performance about, for example, 'migrant rights', and spend a portion of their time in the studio 'messaging about' with materials, before folding all that 'creativity' into the resulting work. I'm speaking about an errancy at a more fundamental level: that of a studio practice that exists alongside other commitments (social, political, etc.), with its own distinct rhythms and momentums. And that the hours I carve away for this studio might often feel in conflict with, or a betrayal of, these

other commitments, given all the very evident needs within my communities. (Thinking back to Sister Sledge, a betrayal of certain 'responsibilities'.) But I am suggesting that such a studio practice can give rise to materials that are extremely potent and generative within these very communities from which one has turned away.

However, while this might appear to resonate with common appeals for 'open-ended-ness' and 'uncertainty' in creative practice<sup>18</sup>, I hold that the possible values of these errancies (or descents, withdrawals, or "personal excesses" to use Bonney's language) is determined by their sustained relation to an artist's sensitivities and apprehensions to these "dominant social and economic systems". As Theodor Adorno puts it this "distance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension."<sup>19</sup> Without this, I suspect that any plunge into creative practice – no matter how messy or riotous that art-making might look – will ultimately remain safely nestled within these dominant political systems, without much capacity to exceed or subvert them.

Thank you.

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1. Rethinking Roehampton, website [here](#), accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
2. Organising for Change, curated by Amaara Raheem, organised by [Dance Art Foundation](#). Online, 17-20 May 2021. ↩
3. Event description on [Techne website](#), accessed 9 March 2023: "In the arts and humanities, often impact agendas are perceived as limiting the experimental and speculative nature of research and imposing the need for "applied" or quantifiable outcomes. But what if creative and speculative practice and research were in themselves seen as capable of catalysing change, through their intrinsic subversive potential, their ability to question, interrupt and transform dominant social and economic narratives and systems?" ↩
4. I think here of Aimé Césaire's definition of "Poetic knowledge" here as being "born in the great silence of scientific knowledge." (quoted in Kelley, R. D. G. (2000) 'A Poetics of Anticolonialism' in *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press). For the purposes of this text, I am eliding 'scientific knowledge' with practices of political organising discussed by Jo Freeman (1972, 'Tyranny of Structurelessness'. Available [here](#).) or Dean Spade (2020, *Mutual Aid*. London: Verso.). ↩
5. Sister Sledge (1979) *We Are Family*. New York: Cotillion. Available [here](#), accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
6. Bonney, Sean (2015) Letter on Poetics, in *Letters Against the Firmament*. London: Enitharmon Press. p.141 ↩

7. "Politics is where putatively individual subjects act and speak in public in so-called collectivities or coalitions or concert. And [...] the figure who instantiates the political in this regard is the citizen. And the citizen is co-terminus with the subject, co-terminus with the self. Co-terminus with a certain notion of normative personhood. And this is where Wilderson's [Frank B. Wilderson III] work is totally formative. Because what he shows [...] two things. It's not just that black folk have been excluded from those modalities of citizenship, personhood, subjecthood, and all the particular qualities that allows persons and subjects to inhabit the world. [...] But in fact that normative notions of personhood are predicated on that exclusion. Which is to say: predicated on the regulation and exclusion of that insurgency. Which one might say blackness instantiates." Fred Moten in *Millenials are Killing Capitalism* (2020) *'Wildcat The Totality' - Fred Moten And Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons In A Time Of Pandemic And Rebellion (Part 1)* [Podcast]. Available [here](#). Accessed: 9 Mar 2023. Quote from around 48:30. ↩
8. Holiday, Harmony (2022) *It Must Be the Devil. Black Muses and Black Music*. Available [here](#). Accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
9. Season Butler gave the keynote address at the start of the conference. The conference organiser, Daniela Perazzo Domm, has written extensively about the work of choreographer Jonathan Burrows, who works in relation to the follow Deborah Hay's quote (see footnote 10) ↩
10. Burrows, Jonathan (2018) Politics, in Ellis, S., Blades, H. & Waelde, C. (Eds.) *A World of Muscle, Bone & Organs: Research and Scholarship in Dance*. Coventry: C-DaRe. pp. 252-266. Available [here](#). Accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
11. I don't know of any formal text or artwork by Season Butler which directly addresses this phrase, but she's used it as a caption for her [Twitter account](#) for a number of years. ↩
12. Suhail Malik (2013) *Exit not Escape—On The Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art*. Presented at Artists Space, New York. Available [here](#). Accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
13. Re the neocolonialism of UK universities, I am thinking of the complicity with the UK border force, policing initiatives like Prevent, financial investments in companies complicit in human rights abuses in Palestine, or the extractive relations to scholars of the Global South, as articulated by Silvia Rivera Cuisiquanqi. I spoke about some of this as part of a presentation I gave at Dance Research Matters, at C-DaRE, Conventry University, in May 2021 – available [here](#). ↩
14. Bonney, Sean (2015) *Letters Against the Firmament*. London: Enitharmon Press. p.141 ↩
15. See [here](#). ↩

16. I'm grateful for Harry Josephine Giles for this point, in her 2013 essay 'Seven Models of the Artist', available [here](#). Accessed 9 March 2023. ↩
17. Berger, John and Ondaatje, Michael (2003) *John Berger with Michael Ondaatje, Conversation 4, Episode 7.*, Lannan Foundation, available [here](#). Accessed 9 March 2023. Quote comes from about 5:40 onwards. I came across this interview through Davey Davis' fantastic blog [David Davis](#). ↩
18. I'm thinking of discussions like 'Staying in the Unknown', convened by Yewande103 on 8th March 2023 as part of their programme [Words Collect in My Mouth](#), in which invited speakers SERAFINE1369, Florence Peake and Foluke Taylor all valorising embracing uncertainty in their artistic and therapeutic practices. ↩
19. Adorno, Theodor (2020) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. Translated by Jephcott, E. F. N. London: Verso. p.127 ↩