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Publication Date

2020

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

CARTOGRAPHIES OF BECOMING- MAPPING A DELEUZIAN/ZEN
FRAMEWORK ONTO LIVE PERFORMANCE

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in
THEATRE ARTS

by

David Crellin

September 2020

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2020

Table of Contents

Page 1: Introduction

Page 6: Methodology

Page 12: Case Study 1- Rimini Protokoll

Page 19: Case Study 2- Circus Contraption

Page 31: Conclusion

List of Figures

Page 15- Figure 1: Rimini Protokoll's *100% City*

Page 17- Figure 2: Rimini Protokoll's *100% City*, Petri Dish Effect

Page 23- Figure 3: Circus Contraption, *The Show to End All Shows*, Opening Parade

Page 24- Figure 4: Circus Contraption, *The Show to End All Shows*, Wake Up

Page 27- Figure 5: Circus Contraption, *The Show to End All Shows*, Gone Fishin'

Page 28- Figure 6: Circus Contraption, *The Show to End All Shows*, The Becoming-Cockroaches

Abstract

Cartographies of Becoming

David Crellin

In this thesis, I will demonstrate that live performance is powerfully situated to apply insights articulated by French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and that of Zen Buddhism, which share many similarities. I will situate the Deleuzian/Zen project in and across two contrasting productions, to illustrate its utility as a foundational strategy for the creation of new work and in order to offer an expanded way of thinking live performance potential. The first production, a post-dramatic, mediatized event, *100% City* was created by Rimini Protokoll, a Berlin-based collective, and performed in over 30 cities around the world. The second production is an immersive circus-based allegory, *The Show To End All Shows*, imagined by Circus Contraption, a Seattle-based performance troupe, of which I was the co-founder and a principal performer. Through my analysis of these performances, I will illustrate the effectiveness of adopting a Deleuzian/Zen framework toward creating live performance that gives rise to greater inclusive, non-hegemonic freedom of expression, and offers a stronger facility for engaging with the world around us.

Dedication

A debt of gratitude to my thesis committee, Professors Weems, Gallagher and Chemers for their support and assistance. I would like to further extend thanks to Professor Marianne Weems for her vision and mentorship. A tip o' the hat and a big, wet circus kiss to my dear friend and colleague, Professor Michael Chemers, for opening up a joyous world of academic scholarship, in addition to being an stalwart advocate and ceaseless champion of my work and potential. Finally, to my partner Colleen and our son Aidan, for your grace and uplifting countenance as I launched myself into another compelling adventure, this time, a journey of knowledge.

“Is that what art is? To be touched thinking what we feel is ours when, in the end, it was someone else, in longing, who finds us?”- Ocean Vuong

Introduction

Art, in all of its forms, plays a huge role in how we think and write ourselves into the story of our existence. It is a fundamental way in which we reflect and express our humanity. Art holds the power to inscribe narratives that vivify and celebrate our endeavors. It can also disrupt entrenched ways of thinking, exposing existing structures of discordant fallacy and unproductive fictions, pointing us toward more beneficial, less damaging onto-epistemological positions.

In this thesis, I will demonstrate that live performance is powerfully situated to apply insights articulated by French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and that of Zen Buddhism, which share many similarities. I will situate the Deleuzian/Zen project in and across two contrasting productions, to illustrate its utility as a foundational strategy for the creation of new work and in order to offer an expanded way of thinking live performance potential. The first production, a post-dramatic, mediatized event, *100% City* was created by Rimini Protokoll, a Berlin-based collective, and performed in over 30 cities around the world. The second production is an immersive circus-based allegory, *The Show To End All Shows*, imagined by Circus Contraption, a Seattle-based performance troupe, of which I was the co-founder and a principal performer. Through my

analysis of these performances, I will illustrate the effectiveness of adopting a Deleuzian/Zen framework toward creating live performance that gives rise to greater inclusive, non-hegemonic freedom of expression, and offers a stronger facility for engaging with the world around us.

In the 21st century, the global community has become increasingly fragmented. The inequality and division between socio-economic classes continue to grow and fracture. Our planet's resources are steadily diminishing, and we struggle to combat the catastrophic impact we have placed upon our biosphere. The rise of national and tribal rhetoric seeks to erode social cohesion, reinforcing a narrative that is counterproductive to expansive understanding and sustainable human relations. The ubiquity of technology has offered us innumerable benefits, yet has also inundated us with a maelstrom of information, further complicating our ability to assimilate and maintain equilibrium in our endeavors. These tensions pose ever-increasing complications to our very existence, and if we do not rise to the challenges before us, we may find ourselves, "turning and turning in the widening gyre,"¹ with little chance of recompense.

It is my belief that much of the fragmentation and imbalance that appears to accompany our journey is due, in no small part, to an outmoded way of thinking and being in the world. This involves a privileging of thought, dominant in the

¹ W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, (New York City: Dial Press, 1920)

West since Plato, which has calcified into an ontology of discrete separation: A dichotomy between content and form, emphasizing binaries of subject/object distinction. This results in a framework of negative analogy, or as aptly stated by Hayden White, “ostensive self-definition by negation.”² It creates an ontological trap of sorts, allowing only the limitations (and lamentations) of *either/or* at the expense of the diffuse, inclusive *both/and*. As a method of inquiry, it seeks to understand a thing by what it *is not* in order to arrive at what *it is*. This privileging of discontinuity, with its insistence on a primacy of opposition, is at the root of many of the unproductive fictions that have shaped discourses on race, sex, violence, and other manifestations of intolerance and exclusion. Alas, it is also often at the forefront of contemporary scholarship in the arts, sciences and humanities.

In contrast, there exist more productive fictions found in a number of philosophical and ontological traditions. These traditions speak to the fallacy of discontinuity as the a priori condition of our existence. They view all things as non-discrete, interconnected and in-process, and provide a necessary framework for a re-evaluation of our definition of self, as well as a rehabilitation of our sense of implicit connection to all things, most specifically our human community.

² Hayden White, ‘Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea’, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), 151–2.

Foremost is a metaphysics of continuity posited by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and evolves a lineage of thought addressed by the Stoics, Dun Scotus, Spinoza, Bergson, Nietzsche and others. These thought streams continue to be expanded upon through the work of contemporary scholars such as Simon O’Sullivan, Brian Massumi, Peter Zhang, Fredrika Spindler, Alison Pullen, Elizabeth Grosz and more. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy places all things as variations along a continuum that are mutually arising and immanent, engaged in processes toward inherent connection, continuity and a principle of univocity. An important way in which this philosophy is given form is through their concept of the rhizome, as observed in nature. The rhizome functions here as a working structure from which to actualize a more expansive way of being. If we, as artists can harness the generative power offered by this philosophical outlook, which Deleuze and Guattari call a “metaphysics of a differential calculus,”³ it can add vital new perspectives and outcomes to our work, wrapping what we do in an embodied embrace that is intersectional, inclusive and serves as “a bracing curative for the afflictions of our times.”⁴

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (London: Continuum, 1994) p. 280.

⁴ Circus Contraption’s motto

The Eastern philosophical tradition of Zen also speaks eloquently to the illusory nature of separateness in our personal and interrelational being. Zen connect us to an inclusive, diffuse, generative framework on which we might create more productive, dynamic ways of being. It is a tradition that foregrounds non-dualistic thinking, embraces the liminal and abstract, and offers a balanced and sustainable engagement with the natural world, human achievement and social interaction, fostering a sense of connection before difference: An optimistic and sturdy bough laden with blossoms, to rest our heads and stay the journey, as it were. As a methodology for inscribing these more productive fictions upon the human story, art is exquisitely qualified for the task.

The first production I will survey is *100% City* by Rimini Protokoll, which investigates a multiplicity of possible connections and potentialities in the human community through interrogating the notion of individuals and groups as fixed, statistical determinants. It also asks us to question reliance on binary thinking as a means to privilege information and concretize social strata.

The second production is the work of Circus Contraption, a circus-based collective, of which I was co-founder and a principal performer. This practice-as-research inquiry allows me a unique, “in-situ” vantage point, as it were, in which to incorporate and examine the concept of the rhizome as an origin point of reference for live performative creation.

There are many prisms through which to engage and refract creative expression and meaning, in the context of these groups and others. As such, this inquiry by no means offered as definitive. The Deleuzian/Zen project is but one way to interrogate and imagine an expanded praxis.

No philosophical inquiry or scholarly endeavor can encapsulate the totality of its subject. They serve to inspire expanded, critical thinking and offer insights as to how we *might* live, not as dictums of how we *should*. They can only constitute ideas towards what are ultimately active encounters with life which must be experienced and embodied. The scope of this master's thesis cannot fully explore the many avenues of interrogation that arise from these inquiries and as such, I realize that much will be "left on the table." This engagement will frame a few key investigations, through an aperture that allows sufficient light for adequate focus, yet not so wide as to obfuscate the portrait. It is my intent to situate these ideas in present discourses and add perhaps, a somewhat novel way to think them into our work as artists. This will be an ongoing focus of inquiry that I seek to expand and refine in future scholarly pursuits, beginning with my candidacy for an MFA in Digital Arts and New Media at UCSC in the fall of 2020.

Methodology

By way of a philosophical and intellectual taxonomy, I will begin with a broad and diffuse accounting of the transformative conviviality embodied by Zen thought, as a system in which to inscribe a diffuse and generous reading of life. This is syncretic and inseparable from the embodiment of the same through the work of Deleuze and Guattari and is fundamental to my understanding of their work, and its integration into an expanded vocabulary of artistic praxis.

For my review of the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I will investigate a specific aspect of their onto-epistemological project, that of the rhizome and its utility for thinking about live performance. Much has been written about Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome as a way of thinking across the social sciences, critical theory, education and politics, as well as artistic endeavors such as painting, music, literature, and conceptual/performance art. My research has indicated that there has been very little attention given, however, to situating the rhizome as a prism through which to critique and re-imagine the potency of live performance. To the end, I will draw upon the scholarship of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as that of their philosophical contemporaries; a selection of second and third wave Deleuzians at work today.

My reading of Zen literature draws not from its existence as historical institution but as a system of being, in tendency toward dismantling illusions of separateness, foregrounding continuity and presupposing connectedness.

Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, the practitioner and scholar responsible for introducing Zen to a Western mindset, gives us insight into the manner in which Zen asks us to engage. “Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis. If anything, it is the antipode to logic, by which I mean the dualistic mode of thinking.”⁵ As such, Zen is philosophy that is ultimately experiential, not arrived at through purely intellectual means alone. In the spaces between a dualistic or traditional western mode of thinking, lies a fecund, active multiplicity of expression, where “lived experience is an absolutely abstract thing.”⁶ In Deleuzian terms, this is the territory of the rhizome (more on this later), where all potentialities are in play, and the virtual is made manifest. The expressions that arise from these manifestations are not definitive and objective. They do not abide as monoliths. This foundational outlook is mirrored in Zen philosophy, where all is disabused of the notion of a stable or fixed identity. The Vietnamese Buddhist scholar and monk Thich Naht Hanh reminds us that “nothing remains the same for two consecutive *ksanas* (the shortest imaginable periods of time) .”⁷ This realization is but one of the ways in which Zen functions as “a discipline in awareness, a result of which the mutual interrelation of all things and all events becomes a constant sensation.”⁸ This ever-changing landscape, an always connected sensorium, can give rise to a gestalt, resulting in the dissolution of the

⁵ D. T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964) Ch. 2

⁶ Daniel W. Smith, *Essays on Deleuze*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) p. 307

⁷ Thich Naht Hanh, *Zen Keys*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995) p. 39

⁸ Alan Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*, (New York: Pantheon, 1962) p. 8

binary in favor of the univocal, or the embodied experience of an organized whole that is more than the sum of its parts. In order to form this concept, however, requires one to adopt a position of non-centrality, non-discretion and, at the very least, a contingent definition of self. This “constant sensation” is the interconnected nature of existence, or in Deleuzian terms, the plane of immanence.⁹ Along this plane of immanence, all potential outcomes are active and “in-play”, constituting a vital place from which to investigate art and life.

In the introductory chapter to their important book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduce a concept fundamental to that of their philosophy, that of the rhizome.¹⁰ The concept of the rhizome is specific to my engagement in the Deleuzo-Guattarian project. Here they liken Western schools of thought, which have been typically organized in hierarchical structures, as resembling that of a tree- a deeply rooted and well-defined foundation from which grow limbs, branching off and in service to the main body. Its differentiation is linear and predictable. This arboreal metaphor concentrates its energy upwards in a singular expression defined by its locus- “a figure formed by all the points satisfying a particular equation of the relation between coordinates, or by a point, line, or surface moving according to mathematically defined

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 35

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), p. 5

conditions.”¹¹ Media theorist Dan Clinton offers this Deleuzian annotation, “the tree comes to symbolize the distinction between subject and object, between signifier and signified, encompassing the whole of dualistic logic through its branching patterns, through its definitions of set pathways between root and branch.”¹²

This in contrast with the expression of the rhizome. Expanding upon a definition found in the Oxford English Dictionary, a rhizome is, in botanical terms, “a continuously growing, horizontal, underground structure which expresses itself in the creation of adventitious appendages at propitious intervals of opportunity.”¹³ The energy of its potential draws from the non-centralized, diffuse and non-hierarchical expression of its nature. The rhizome, as conscripted by Deleuze and Guattari, is promiscuous and elusive. It is always in the act of becoming, its definition under constant revision. The rhizome is always seeking connection as a continuous phenomenon with “no beginning or end. It is always in the middle.”¹⁴ It is always a verb and never an adjective. The Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome is a heterogeneous admixture that is “neither subject nor

¹¹ *Locus* definition, retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/locus> (Oxford: OUP, 2019)

¹² Dan Clinton, *Theories of Media*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003)

¹³ *Rhizome* definition, retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/rhizome> (Oxford: OUP, 2019)

¹⁴ Brent Adkins, *A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, (Edinburgh: EUP, 2015), p.23

object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions”¹⁵ of potentialities. If the Tree of Thought in the West may be characterized as stable, axiomatic, determinant and transcendent, then the philosophy of Zen and Deleuze is that of the rhizome- diffuse, problematic, contingent, and immanent. How might we use this notion of the rhizome to generate new connections and create encounters that focus on available potentials that can be actualized toward more productive performance experiences?

Simon O’Sullivan calls these connective encounters “affect events.”¹⁶ and describes them, “as the effect another body, for example, an art object, has upon my own body and my body’s duration.”¹⁷ This reframes Deleuze himself in his essay, *Spinoza and the Three Ethics*, where these durational events are “passages, becomings, rises and falls, continuous variations of power that pass from one state to another... they are signs of increase and decrease, signs that are vectoral (of the joy-sadness type) and no longer scalar.”¹⁸ Such events, are “to use Deleuzo-Guattarian terms- and to move the register away from deconstruction and away from representation- the *molecular* ‘beneath’ the *molar*. The molecular understood here as life’s, and art’s, intensive quality, as the stuff that goes on

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 204

¹⁶ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect”, *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, December 2001, pp. 125-135; 126

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, “Spinoza and the Three Ethics”, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Minnesota University Press, 1997, p.139

beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification,”¹⁹ and are registered on the body as immanent to experience, a sort of precursor to discourse. The effects of these encounters function as interventions into normative expectations, requiring one to disrupt habitual neural pathways and seek new potentials of thought. Known in neuroscience as *schema violations*, they function to facilitate enhanced cognitive flexibility.²⁰ These encounters can function as interventions into engrained ways of thinking, allowing us to suspend normal cognitive patterns and attend to other transhuman and apersonal registers that are non-discursive and extra-textual. These registers inform and expand our ability to assimilate and embody experience from a more panoramic viewpoint. We become the Deleuzian concept of “a *body without organs*: in this context, a strategy for accessing that which is normally ‘outside’ yourself; your ‘experimental milieu’ which everywhere accompanies your sense of self.”²¹ Might this outlook provide us, as artists, new territories of expression and investigation that map effulgent, promiscuous and vivid cartographies of becoming? I offer the two productions below as studies that point us toward a Deleuzian/Zen reading of performative expression.

I. Rimini Protokoll’s *100% City*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Simone M. Ritter, Simone Kühn, Barbara C. N. Müller, Rick B. van Baaren, Marcel Brass & Ap Dijksterhuis (2014) “The Creative Brain: Corepresenting Schema Violations Enhances TPJ Activity and Boosts Cognitive Flexibility”, *Creativity Research Journal*, 26:2, 144-150, DOI: 10.1080/10400419.2014.901061

²¹ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect”, *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, December 2001, pp. 125-135; 127

Berlin-based Rimini Protokoll was founded in 2000 by Helgard Haug, Daniel Wetzell and Stefan Kaegi and, according to their website “have since worked in different constellations under this name. Work by work, they have expanded the means of the theatre to create new perspectives on reality.”²² They premiered their show *100 % City* in February of 2008 in Berlin, and it has since been recreated in over 30 cities around the world. Rimini Protokoll describes *100 % City* as “100 citizens that represent their city in 5 criteria, a sample, a cross-section of the society, always assembled into ever-changing, new group pictures on a big, revolving stage. Sorted according to age or address, gender, political leanings, preferred local pub, means of transport, sandwich spread, playwright and then, bit by bit, as a sea of voices, as a geometric body on 100 square metres of stage.”²³ Rimini Protokoll critiques census-taking and the collection of data as a specious and unreliable means in which to represent the multiplicity of existence. It holds up “the precarious nature of statistical accuracy and the underlying forces that currently seem to be complicating the interpretation and pursuit of various truths about human existence.”²⁴

²² Rimini Protokoll, “About”, <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/about>

²³ Rimini Protokoll, “100% City”, <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/projects/100-stadt-7-1>

²⁴ Windeyer, Richard C. "Petri Dish Deceptions: The Search for 100% Veracity in Rimini Protokoll's Statistical Portrait of Montreal" *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 175, 2018, p. 29-34. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/699071

In this production, select residents of a given city are recruited based on pre-existing criteria. These initial participants then have twenty-four hours to recruit a second resident, and so on. The process continues, in what Rimini Protokoll calls “a statistical chain reaction”, until they have reached 100 participants, which serve as a demographic snapshot of that city.

The participants, which Rimini refers to as “experts of the everyday” gather on stage, originally as an unstructured collective of individuals. They are then asked a series of questions, which are generated by Rimini and the 100 participants (or “percentiles”) in the days before the live staging. These questions vary from city to city and are meant to reflect the statistics, subjects and issues of most importance to the city they are representing. Initially the questions take the form of general inquiries in keeping with those one might encounter in a typical census, “Who is a native of our city?”; “Who rents their home?”, etc. As each question is posed, the percentiles respond by moving around the stage to congregate momentarily with those who share the same answer to a given prompt. As the performance proceeds, the questions become increasingly more specific and personal, such as “Who feels safe where they live?”; “Who has broken the law?”; and “Who is doing the work they dreamed of doing as a child?” By the end of the evening, the respondents have been asked to express their views on a range of topics, from environmental and civic responsibilities to violence, war, religion and abortion. Over time, what began as somewhat

predictable groupings become increasingly more promiscuous, interconnected, and problematic, destabilizing ideas of reductive assimilation and axiomatic discretion.

An overhead camera (Fig. 1) projects the onstage proceedings live (what Rimini Protokoll calls the *Petri Dish Effect*) providing a illustrative visual metaphor of an always changing landscape of human connection, or in Deleuzian terms, “the oscillation of representation with regard to an always dominant identity, or rather the oscillations of the Identical with regard to an always rebellious matter,”²⁵ matter, in this case, being the multiplicities of potential ways of being in the world that co-arise, co-exist and interconnect within the expression of an individual.

²⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, (London: Continuum, 2001) p.333



Figure 1: Rimini Protokoll's 100% City

The rounds of questioning are punctuated by short stories or statements on the part of individual participants, recounting moments in their lives that are of formative import and significance to them. During one of the productions of *100% City* in Vancouver, British Columbia, a gentleman, who hailed originally from Angola, spoke of being bullied there as a child, which became his impetus to learn the discipline of boxing. His present occupation in the North American city in which he now lives is that of a boxing coach and mentor to children. He culminated his anecdote by asking the group on stage to “raise your fist if you have had to defend yourself.”²⁶

²⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *100% City*, sourced from <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/100-vancouver>

Another expression of the multiplicity from this performance, was from an older woman who recounted that her husband was killed in the war in 1944. She was left with two small children and limited options in the small town she was in. Before the war, her husband worked for a public rail line. After his death, she made the decision to re-settle in another city. The rail company offered her a ticket to wherever she wanted to go. And that is how she became a percentile in city she now calls home. Her question to the remaining participants onstage was, “Who has moved to escape, to start their lives again, or to reinvent themselves?”²⁷ These inquiries serve to further complicate our tendency to view individuals as determinate, fixed and discrete, or as Brent Adkins states, after Deleuze, “one doesn’t extract timeless truths from the continuous; one intervenes strategically. The discrete is axiomatic; the continuous is problematic.”²⁸

The performance draws toward its final movements by lowering the lights on stage, so each of the participants can respond to the remaining questions by illuminating a small, handheld flashlight. (See Fig 2) An overhead camera (The Petri Dish Effect) again bears witness to the visual metaphor, lifting us from individual determinants of corporeal definition to reveal a constellation of

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Brent Adkins, *A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, (Edinburgh: EUP, 2015), p.5

humanity, a pulsing and temporal display of a “constant variability that tends toward infinity.”²⁹

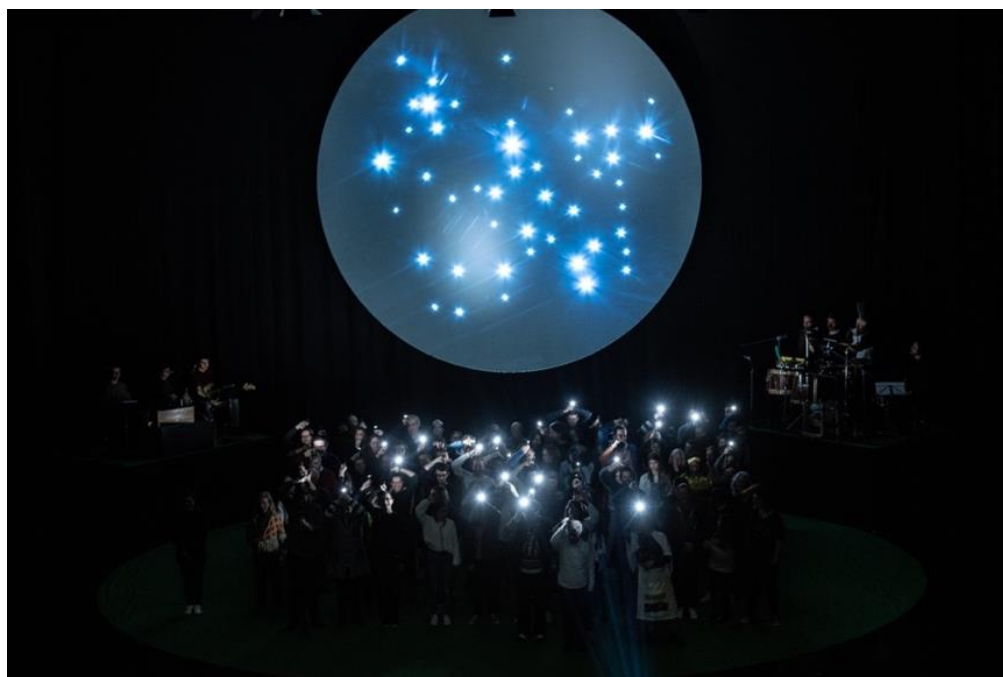


Figure 2: Rimini Protokoll's 100% City Petri Dish Effect

The evening is brought to a close by all 100 participants dancing onstage in an embodied celebration of connection and interrelation, a metaphoric reaffirmation of the whole as being greater than the sum of its parts, a “continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end.”³⁰ This may account for the response on the

²⁹ Ibid, See Smith, “Mathematics and the Theory of Multiplicities: Deleuze and Badiou Revisited,” in *Essays on Deleuze*, for an extended discussion of this idea.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), pg. 22

part of audiences worldwide, as noticed by the three members of Rimini Protokoll when they offer, “perhaps a very strong source of this sense of being touched is the experience of a coexistence of differences.”³¹ I read “touched” in this sense to mean a felt sense of connection and interrelational being, and the “coexistence of differences” as a phrase that hints at the Deleuzian concept of the plane of immanence.

Rimini Protokoll acts asks us to reimagine ourselves as a continuous process of revision, a temporary manifestation of intensities of expression, always in the act of becoming. They unbosom the hidden, generative forces that territorialize and deterritorialize our lives. By framing the journeys of a diverse and constantly shifting environment of humanity, as an always contingent field of experience, *100% City* deconstructs presumed notions of a reductive, statistical model, which is the product of binary thinking, in favor of a more productive, heterogeneous fiction privileging diffusion, abstraction, impermanence, and horizontality. In short, the rhizome.

With this understanding, I will survey another aspect and contrasting example of creative, rhizomatic inquiry through the narrative-based, circus/cabaret production imagined by Circus Contraption in 2008, *The Show To End All*

³¹ Contemporary Theatre Review, “...faces behind the numbers’: Rimini Protokoll and Daniel Koczy discuss 100% City”, <https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2015/rimini-protokoll-100-percent-city/>

Shows. This show explores the detrimental and destructive effects of dichotomous, binary thinking and offers, in Contraptions' signature style, a complementary vision to the expression assayed above in the work of Rimini Protokoll.

II. Circus Contraption's *The Show To End All Shows*

Founded in 1998, Seattle-based Circus Contraption, of which I was the co-founder and a principal performer, created five full-length shows, numerous cabarets and short-form productions, released six CD recordings and performed over 500 times in North America and Western Europe before disbanding in 2010. Our statement of purpose was to present "surreal, circus-based performance art"... that "explore(s) interdisciplinary territory...embracing elements from widely divergent art forms... as an example of a radical/revolutionary paradigm."³² To achieve these ends, we utilized the aesthetic and performative palette of circus and variety arts to examine contemporary society, disrupt entrenched notions of security and social conditioning, complicate the subject/object relationship between performer and audience, and create artistic expressions of liminality and potential.

These discourses were foundational tenets of our creative process, regardless of the theme or style of a given creative product. Noted performance scholar,

³² Circus Contraption, "Mission", <https://www.circuscontraption.com/mission.html>

Michael Chemers, who followed the trajectory and evolution of our troupe, states that Circus Contraption, “goes a long way toward creating that condition long pursued by the avant garde; the destabilization of passive spectatorship. The fact is you are never completely certain how to react.”³³ He accurately understands that, as part of our *raison d’être*, Circus Contraption expressly avoided any particular message or moral, in favor of visceral, embodied encounters.

In estimation of our work generating these schema violations and their utility, Dr. Chemers writes:

“for what afflictions, then, in light of the denials of any particular ‘message’, does Circus Contraption offer itself as a bracing cure? Well, Sigmund Freud actually defined the experience of that “not OK feeling“ as a therapeutic one; he called it *unheimlich* (“uncanny”), stimulated by an encounter with something grotesque, just as a “sublime“ experience derives from an encounter with something transcendently beautiful. Specifically, the uncanny experience is one of sudden confrontation with anxieties thought to be conquered, but abruptly revealed to be merely repressed”... and creates “a mild confusion about the limits of identity and one’s role in the cosmos (Freud).”³⁴

These *unheimlich* maneuvers create destabilizing experiences which disarm arboreal securities and challenge us to journey into liminal and diffuse territories of thinking and being.

³³ Michael Chemers, “That Not OK Feeling, Circus Contraption’s Grand American Travelling Dime Museum”, *Theatre Forum International* (Fall 2007): 58–67; 64

³⁴ Chemers, 65

My current research into Deleuze and Guattari has confirmed the integrity and intentionality of our body of work as a situated within a Deleuzian frame. As a practice-as-research model, I engage Circus Contraption's final, full-length production, *The Show To End All Shows*, to bring into focus our outlook of rhizomatic instigation.

Circus Contraption describes *The Show To End All Shows* as an artistic encounter that "imagines a family-owned circus... and the glamour shows signs of decay. A sense of imminent destruction looms as things begin to go awry under the tent. The Ringmaster (a Jim Jones-style patriarch) insists upon the willful denial of their circus world's demise, not only by his progeny but by the audience. This joyful romp to oblivion... tells the story of the show that must go on—despite all evidence that the show, maybe even the world, will be extinguished before the closing act."³⁵ The production foregrounds the story of a circus troupe in decline, as a stand-in for society-at-large, and as a territory in which to interrogate and critique the destructive nature of hierarchical, axiomatic modes of being and the privileging of arboreal, transcendent thought, while reaffirming and rehabilitating the generative nature of a promiscuous, problematic and adaptive reading of life.

³⁵ Circus Contraption, "Press Release", 2009, https://www.circuscontraption.com/press_release_20090129.html

The night begins, as do most of Circus Contraption's endeavors, with an informal opening of the house, allowing participants to enter with a casual sense of belonging. Performance members wander through the house, in character, greeting and talking to the new arrivals. The ringmaster (played by me) physically engages audience members in an informal manner, sitting on their laps, inviting them to stand up and be seen, and generally signifying all are "fair game" and that no one is "off-limits."

This gesture inaugurates a more horizontally-situated, diffuse environment that foreshadows the audiences' experience will not be one of passive engagement, and is "definitely not for those who prefer to sit quietly and watch, (as) this group will cross that "safe" line between audience and performers."³⁶ This complicates the relationship between the performers (object) and the audience (subject), implicating them as part of the proceedings, both in the affirmation of their sense of belonging and welcome, as well as piercing the safety of anonymity and inserting a unsettling possibility that we might "drag innocents onto the stage."³⁷ This inscribes them as coefficients of outcome and meaning, placing them inside of the encounter and implicating them as accomplices.

³⁶ Rajkhet Dirzhud-Rashid, "Circus Contraption Just Keeps Getting Better", *Seattle Gay News*, May 18, 2001

³⁷ Ibid.

The main of the show is ushered in by a grand and glorious parade that initiates onstage, then snakes through the audience. (See Figure 3) The opening refrains inserted into the charivari encourage participants to run away with the circus, as a means to provide “a sheltering immunity”³⁸ from the world outside and offer as the alternative “a last vestige of how things should be.”³⁹ This certitude and promise of transcendent assurances represent the seductive allure of dichotomous and oppositional thinking and the virility of its infectious nature in society.



Figure 3: The Show to End All Shows, Opening Parade

³⁸ Circus Contraption, “Opening Parade”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008

³⁹ Ibid.

In a paean to the comforting boundaries of the binary, “Off N’ Away”, Shmootzi The Clod, (a character played by Drew Keriakedis) as the most recent initiate into the fold, sings “the world outside is scary.”⁴⁰ He uses this phrase as a means to distance himself from implication in the intricate, complicated and rhizomatic network of life. Inherent in the use of the word *outside* lies a negative analogy. He calls upon this distinction to define what *he* is not- it (the world) is outside, *I* therefore, am inside. Further in the song, he assuages himself with the presumption of security, which he shares with all of those who think as he does, “we’re safe in our wagons and tents,”⁴¹ thereby constituting an act of “ostensive self-definition by negation.” (White).

Pinky D’Ambrosia (played by Sari Breznau) warns us of the unsustainable nature of dichotomous thinking in her cautionary tale, “Wake Up.” (See Figure 4) When she steps forward on an empty stage to sing, “you want something to believe in” so that “you never feel lonely” she offers as justification the idea that “for just one moment, you’re safe and in the clear.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Circus Contraption, “Off N’ Away”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Circus Contraption, “Wake Up”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008



Figure 4: Wake Up

In doing so, she affirms the temptation to invest in subject/object distinction, a logos that, while it may offer momentary security, will ultimately reveal itself as a temporary fix. In realization of this delusion of separateness, (what Zen calls “the veil of maya”⁴³) Pinky concludes that, by investing in the axiomatic,

⁴³ Paul Andrew Powell, *Zen and Artificial Intelligence, and Other Philosophical Musings by a Student of Zen Buddhism*, (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), p.73

“somehow we’ve forgotten that it’s all just make-believe.”⁴⁴ She shows us that the world is comprised, not of transcendent truths or fixed and stable ideas, but constructs which are always under revision. We ‘make’ beliefs; therefore, they are contingent states of being, temporary intensities or a Deleuzo-Guattarian “bloc of sensations,”⁴⁵ which expresses itself in the aforementioned expressions of the rhizome as “adventitious appendages at propitious intervals of opportunity.”

Circus Contraption continues to interrogate the unsustainable nature of dualistic thinking by way of inviting participants to engage in a ritual act of submission to the promised security of binary solutions. In “Drink It Down” the Ringmaster (David Crellin) reminds them in apocalyptic and metaphoric tones, the complicated and problematic nature of engaging life as multiplicity, “So you see, my dear friends, I’m afraid that the world outside is at ruinous ends, all in vain, filled with despair, no longer a game, for no life will be spared from the maw of the beast, it’s a moveable feast,”⁴⁶ in this case, the maw being the insatiable and promiscuous intensities of the rhizome- always under revision, non-hierarchical, inclusive and transgressive: an inverse of Hayden White’s maxim, transformed into an “ostensive self-definition by *addition*.”

⁴⁴ Circus Contraption, “Wake Up”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pg. 164

⁴⁶ Circus Contraption, “Drink It Down”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008

In an effort to reestablish a primacy of discontinuity, my character offers as nostrum, the pleasant, numbing assurance of subjugating complexity and diverse discourse to the axiomatic and discrete, “Raise your glass, to your lips, my sweet gems, you can remedy all with a few, slender sips. You decide, it’s your fate, stem the tide as it crests, feel the warmth in your breast, swelling with pride as you’re welcomed inside, there’s no need to discuss, become one of us- Drink It Down!”⁴⁷

This act of desperation foreshadows the predictable outcome of fealty to a system based on separation. Ultimately, the center will not hold, the forces of negation imposing too great a pressure on the system, and the entire project collapses. Internecine battles fulminate and roil, as characters subsume their rancor into dissipation of self and others. The ringmaster literally expands in physical size, bloated by his hubris and discontinuity, until he is rendered immovable. The circus is torn asunder, bursts in flames and the very edifice that supports it begins to crumble and fall apart. Some members are crushed by the falling debris (of an unproductive fiction). Some exact retribution upon others as a last gasp of exclusion. None escape. As the embers dim and the stage fades to black, from out of the darkness, the sound of a single round of gunfire reports on the final casualty of an ontology of discontinuity- the ringmaster, turgid and motionless, a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

sign across his chest that reads, “Gone Fishing”, and a bullet through his head by his own hand- the death of a bad idea. (See Figure 5)



Figure 5: Gone Fishin’

In the epilogue or coda to “The Show To End All Shows”, Circus Contraption gives testament to the generative impulse of the univocal, as out of the ashes arise, in the words of *The Strangers*’ Brendan Kiley, “a dark, shambling grace”⁴⁸, in the form of a chorus line of anthropomorphic cockroaches, not unlike the

⁴⁸ Brendan Kiley, *The Stranger*, May 29, 2008

Deleuzian double figure of the orchid and the wasp first introduced in *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁴⁹ This syncretic assemblage represents a “crossing over into the zone of indiscernibility”⁵⁰ between the two expressions, “in a series of de- and re-territorializations,”⁵¹ that exemplify the concept of the rhizome, and manages, in joyful expression, “to turn decline into its own artistic ascent.”⁵² (See Figure 6)



Figure 6: The Becoming-Cockroaches

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), pg. 10

⁵⁰ Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark, *Deleuze and the Non/Human*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) p. 1

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gianni Truzzi, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 2, 2008

The becoming-cockroach of the human and the becoming-human of the cockroach, as a heterogenous assemblage, parade the stage, kick up their heels and sing a hymn of mirthful acceptance. This celebration reaffirms and rehabilitates an onto-epistemological reading of life that is generous, problematic, non-hierarchical, constantly under revision, contingent, promiscuous, and always seeking connection - a joyous cartography of becoming:

“Sitting here waiting for the bombs to fall
Looks like we're gonna see the end after all
I'm holding my breath and closing my eyes
Saying my last goodbyes
My head is in the toilet and I'm gonna drown
Dig a deep hole underneath the ground
Even though the boat was sinking fast
The band kept right on playing
Hey, it's been good to know ya
The time has come for us to say goodbye
Put on your mask and on your feather boa
We'll sing and dance until the end of time
Heading for the mountains in a motor car
Or to another planet, wouldn't be too far
We're moving along, Singing a song
Waiting for the sky to fall
Ring around the Rosie with a loaded gun
Pocket full of Posies and we're on the run
Maybe they'll be kind enough to drop us some food
Before the last curtain falls.”⁵³

Rimini Protokoll's *100% City* embedded a schematic of the rhizome as an investigation into socio-economic and geographic stabilities based on reductive statistical analysis. Their integration of new media, through the use

⁵³ Circus Contraption, “Hey It's Been Good To Know Ya”, *The Show To End All Shows*, 2008

of an overhead camera (the Petri-Dish Effect) revealed a constantly changing field of social interaction, allowing us to switch spatio-temporal registers, moving us from the molar (discrete) to the molecular (diffuse). This “affect-event” deterritorialized the distinction between signifier and signified and pointed us toward a multivalent, complicated and intersectional reading of humanity. The generative nature of the rhizome then reterritorialized the “percentiles” into a joyful expression of the multiplicity, inherently connected across a plane of immanence, through the *kōmos* of the closing dance party, a playful, metaphoric embodiment of univocity.

Circus Contraption’s *The Show To End All Shows*, utilized narrative, allegorical storytelling to deconstruct the ontology of discrete separation and negative analogy, exposing it as dangerous and existentially destructive. We traced the decline of a familiar social structure (one that for too long has typified and privileged the binary), a “family” of circus performers, into which we inscribed the consequences of hegemonic, axiomatic ways of being. The false promise of oppositional thinking as “a sheltering immunity”, where assurance and certitude assuage (but soon confine and make infirm) is laid bare to reveal destructive and irreparable schisms. The brittle scaffolding of an unsustainable philosophy collapses, and the circus is subsumed and destroyed, having brought about its own destruction as the results of discontinuity.

Again, the rhizome appears as “a bracing curative” by re-territorializing the detritus of exclusion and separation into the transhuman, “dark, shambling grace” of the becoming-cockroaches. These contingent, problematic and promiscuous syncretic assemblages foreground heterogenous and generative vitality, and become an access point that allows us, if even for a moment, to pull back the veil of maya and think ourselves not as discrete and determinate, but as variations along a continuum that are mutually arising, implicitly connected and immanent.

Conclusion

The above works represent two contrasting live performance productions that investigate and critique the limitations of dualistic and axiomatic thinking. They challenge a legacy, often foregrounded in the West, of privileging the binary as a creative locus. In its place, these productions offer experiential, embodied examples of more productive fictions and generative ways of presentation. These are aligned with a reading of art (and life) as situated within the Deleuzian-Zen project of this inquiry.

As an artist, this strategy and viewpoint allows me greater freedom of expression, by moving me away from many of the signifying registers of purely intellectual discourse or critique, and engage more robustly work that

foregrounds embodied experience, continuity and possibility. To be clear, the critical registers are useful and necessary in the context of my artistic process, in order to analyze existing and problematic structures. But once they have revealed the fallacies, fissures and fragmentations, they do not provide me with signposts toward generative re-assimilation. To quote Simon O’Sullivan, a purely “deconstructive reading is not itself a bad thing; indeed, it might be strategically important to employ precisely to counteract the effects of, to disable, a certain kind of aesthetic discourse (as a kind of expanded ideological critique). However, after the deconstructive reading, the art object remains. Life goes on. Art, whether we will it or not, continues producing affects.”⁵⁴

The affects that remain are resonances of continuity, a liminal space of potentiality, where the rhizomatic multiplicity of life is expressed as “moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter. We might even say that affects are immanent to matter. They are certainly immanent to experience.”⁵⁶ When we relegate art solely to an “apparatus of capture”⁵⁷ as a discourse on representation, we place the potency of its embodied nature under erasure, and miss the opportunity to engage it as a site

⁵⁴ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect”, *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, December 2001, pp. 125-135; 126

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

for illumination. Or to reframe this potential in the words of Leonard Cohen, “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”⁵⁸

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome (part of their larger project of an ontology of continuity), and a Zen reading of life, provide generative frameworks from which to create work as an artist. They retain the ability to engage in robust critique, .vital interrogation of hegemonic structures and encourage problematic, complicated axes of creation, while also providing signposts toward connection and univocity. They encourage one to re-imagine life as an interconnected network of engagements, a totality of infinite moments of temporary importance, a spatial and diffuse series of truths, never quite right but never quite wrong; a Zen-like totality where all things are all things all at once, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Inside of this frame we are a rhizomatic assemblage, expressing intensities of promiscuous desire-production, perpetually in the middle, always becoming, totally invested, but only for the moment, both/and, and never not.

Creating from a Deleuzian/Zen, rhizomatic vantage point opens up exciting, new territories for my work as a live performance maker. It is a prism through which to engage with an outlook that is inclusive, and de-centralized, generously seeking connection and continuity. It reminds me as an artist to

⁵⁸ Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”, *The Future*, Legacy Records, 1992

remain supple, flexible and problematic, and complicated. The very nature of the rhizome as creative template reminds me that all art (and life) is a spatial predicament, horizontally diffuse, without the necessity of arboreal, vertical transcendence, arising momentarily as strategies for how I might, not how I must. As a foundational strategy, the Deleuzian/Zen project will further my efforts toward inclusive, intersectional collaboration and pedagogy, as well as to deepen my engagement in the creation and realization of live performance.

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