



Jan Verwoert: IF THINGS ARE NOT QUICKLY TO GO PEAR-SHAPED

This bulletin was originally written under the auspices of the Sommerakademie im Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland; and The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada. With thanks to both institutions.

Cover/back images: Frances Stark, *Academy Mascots*, 2010

1.

The decision to collaborate with others is not a moral but a practical choice. For a musician, for instance, to play in a band is first of all a practical possibility rather than a moral issue.

2.

A work produced by one author can speak with (and for) many different voices, just as an artists' group can choose to speak with a single voice (or not). Contrary to what social moralists claim, a higher headcount of artists by itself won't give you a more democratic form of art. To find a way to truly articulate multiplicity, a group faces the same challenge as a solitary author: to search for forms and techniques that could engage—and give a voice to—the many. Yet, this also implies that collaboration is not a must. If there is freedom in art production, it lies in the liberty to speak by oneself OR together with others, with one voice AND with many voices, i.e., the liberty to choose an appropriate mode of address in response to the spirit of a moment and requirement of a particular situation.

3.

However, to realize the possibility of working with others—and insist on this possibility to be practically viable still—does have political implications today. In the arts, the growing demand to professionalize creative practice has increased the pressure to deliver individually-branded, readily recognizable products, and established the role model of the solitary performer as the professional norm. It's ironic: for a musician to record and perform music by oneself, using little more than a personal computer, originally implied the freedom to own the means of production and travel easily. Now that this working model has become the norm, for a whole group to record, perform, travel and live off what they do is ever more difficult. Believing that we were free to work alone, we tend to overlook the fact that working by oneself is becoming the only option the existing systems of support are prepared to accommodate. To counter that dynamic, keep the repertoire of practical possibilities open and publicly remind the people who provide support that collective production remains

a viable form of practice is therefore crucial, if this avenue is not to be closed down for good. So, in terms of a POLITICS OF PROFESSION, to power down one's own little factory once in a while, in order to go and produce in situations where the conditions of production are created, shared and maintained collectively, is a way to politically commit to the idea of keeping the field of practical possibilities in the arts expanded.

4.

Attempts to produce collaboratively inevitably touch on a foundational aspect of the political process: \*how authority is to be handled\* is always a pressing question when people try to operate as a collective, and one that has to be faced head-on if things are not quickly to go pear-shaped.

5.

Some still invoke the ideal that a collective could act spontaneously, without needing to first negotiate an internal agreement on the use of authority. Effectively, however, this means to project the promise of a messianic (i.e., heaven-sent, unconditionally legitimate) authority onto the group as a whole. Experience shows that the temporarily displaced authority will eventually be re-instated by charismatic characters in the group who succeed in embodying the spirit of the collective promise, thus reclaiming leadership while denying the authority question.

6.

A good method for disabling the mechanisms of messianic projection is to formalize structures of authority in a pragmatic manner. The authority to initiate and terminate a meeting, as well as the task to moderate the discussion (and get people to speak and to listen to each other) should be defined pragmatically as an OPERATIVE MANDATE given to a member of the group. It should then be understood—by the group who authorizes the mandate as well as by the person who receives it—that the power thereby bestowed is merely structural, and that the act of its bestowal is solely indicative of the group's decision that some such structure should exist (if only to prevent messianic charismatic forms

of authority from re-instating themselves). Pragmatism helps protect basic operative structures from becoming charged with psychological projections.

7.

Structuring authority in a pragmatic fashion demands considerable self-discipline from everyone involved. Ironically, the likelihood of people collaborating in this manner tends to be greater, not smaller, when those collaborators are sovereign individuals, i.e., people who don't need a third party to embody power for them (as they know how to do so for themselves) and are therefore able to relinquish power when an acceptable practical arrangement permits them to.

8.

Unfortunately, a default mode that groups tend to fall back on when they seek to determine a shared desire, is that of oedipal transference: one member of the group is singled out as a father figure. The group then transfers the task upon that figure to \*incorporate the demand\* for the group to act and represent. The general question “what may the public expect?” is thereby recast as the specific question “what does the father want?” It's a deceptive simplification: to avoid speculating about the potential responses of future audiences, the group members play off of what's imminently tangible—the reactions of the leader (his approval or critique). Traditional forms of charismatic tyrannical leadership in the field of ensemble production in theatre and cinema (from Brecht to Fassbinder) rely heavily on this model of oedipal transference. But it has also been adopted as a contemporary management technique: to enhance productivity, the leader will create a climate of permanent insecurity. He will be purposefully inconsistent with whom he rewards or reprimands, and he will remain difficult to read, in general, order that everyone will anxiously keep offering up new ideas and perform to the best of their abilities to satisfy his opaque demands (and avoid his wrath). This working model can unleash incredible dynamics and create strong loyalties in an ensemble or cast, as all take the journey through hell together—including the authority figure (Fassbinder arguably exploited himself as much as his actors). Yet, dependent as such solitary figures may be on the collective

energies they channel, their name permits them to move on—if only to recreate similar working conditions in other places.

9.

For anyone committed to EMANCIPATION, however, the model of charismatic tyrannical leadership is the worst possible option—and the search for viable alternatives imperative. In an emancipated artistic collective, each member would in fact recognize the call to act and represent as a demand to be faced directly, on the group's own terms, without prior mediation via an authority figure, so that the responsibility for determining a shared desire is not TRANSFERRED but TAKEN ON by all members alike. When a group emancipates itself and faces the public without the intermediary of an authority figure, it can perform with the liberated force of a multitude of obsessions projected outwards from the many hearts of a headless neurotic machine: this is \*the sheer fun of weird gods at play\* (e.g., *The Muppet Show*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, or ska band *The Selecter* on stage ...).

10.

To facilitate such collective emancipation is difficult, as facilitators are prone to slip back into the “father” role they seek to abolish. To prevent this, facilitators need to take the painful step of OPENLY DISAPPOINTING the expectation that they had a definite idea of what was expected—and again and again to re-address the question to group: “What is there to be desired? What is it that we really really want?”

11.

One good way to interrupt the cycle of oedipal projection and transference is to diffuse the family logic at the heart of this process—for example, by introducing \*new family members\* who don't fit into the binary parent/child relationship. Someone like, say, the Scottish Gay Uncle who suddenly appears at the wedding (as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) or the shamelessly honest grandmother who unapologetically says and does whatever she likes (as in Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*). Such characters are not bound by the moral economy of imaginary

demands and guilty attempts to fulfill them. As no one expects them to expect anything, they are in a unique position to channel collective energies towards an enjoyment that bypasses the oedipal contract. We feel free to go play with someone who has no appointed role whatsoever. The one who invites the (equivalent of the) Gay Uncle or Anarchist Granny may still end up in the Bad Cop position of the moderator who must disappoint. Still, the divine fun to be had FOR ALL with Uncle and Granny tends to be ample compensation for that. So, to initiate a process of collective emancipation, bring in friends with strange habits.

12.

When the headless machine operates, what it produces won't necessarily be a recognizable product, a conventionally coherent discourse, or readily legible representation of identity. It may first of all be a convergence of divergent energies; a joke told by many tellers, not overly concerned with holding back their laughter, until the story is fully told.

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