

Echolocation and Reverberation: Praxical Dispositifs in Laboratory Theatre

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Marije Nie, Adriana La Selva, Andrea Maciel, and Patrick Campbell

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where the cold wind freezes the dreams

Soundtrack with Marije Nie, Patrick Campbell

Preface

How can we write as a constellation of materials, instead of as a string of arguments, where meaning is emerging in-between words, through the activation of the reader? In the body of the reader? How can we invite the reader to dance herself? If the words of a poem are not poetic in and of themselves, and they only become poetic because of a constellation which puts the language in motion, what then of the space in between those words?

"Hungry table."

Introduction

This multi-authored text aims to both extend and reflect upon the polyphonic praxis of Cross Pollination (CP), a nomadic laboratory promoting dialogues in-between different arts practices.^[1] CP was established in 2017 by Marije Nie and Adriana La Selva, performers and scholars with a longstanding connection to Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (Denmark). Over the past three years, Nie and La Selva have gathered a transnational group of core artist-researchers, including Maciel and Campbell, to develop research, knowledge exchange and performance together.

CP is an interdisciplinary platform incorporating fields such as theatre, dance, music, visual arts, circus and somatic practices; the work of CP consists of dialogues in-between these disciplines as well as an expanded understanding of creative work that also incorporates and acknowledges the practices of daily life. Thus, the work of the platform seeks to eschew binary divisions and facile categorisations, and approaches the performative from a broad socio-aesthetic-political perspective that resonates with epistemic fields such as Theatre Anthropology (Barba and Savarese, 1991, 2018; Barba 1995), Performance Studies (Schechner, 1998; Taylor, Fischer-Lichte, 2009; Schneider,

2011), Practice as Research (Allegue, Jones and Kershaw, 2009; Nelson, 2013; Barrett and Bolt, 2019) and Embodied Research (Gil, 1997; Greiner, 2005; and Spatz, 2015). We do not slavishly follow academic trends, however, and our concerns resonate much more with the praxes developed by contemporary theatre/performance laboratories and practitioners such as Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, La Pocha Nostra and William Kentridge, amongst other adepts of creative witchcraft. Furthermore, in our studio work, our biggest conceptual playground lies in the epistemic terrains of new materialism, deep ecology, indigenous philosophical ecology and the philosophy of science (Bohm, 1990; Rolnik and Guattari, 1999; Stengers, 2005; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016; Krenak, 2019).

Echolocation and Reverberation — A Praxical Assemblage

In echolocation, sound is used to orientate a relationship to the surrounding environment; sound waves reverberate against objects, enabling the mapping out of territories (Thaler and Goodale). In CP the objects that we “echolocate” are our *bodies of knowledges*: the crafted constellations of embodied memory and *techné* unique to each individual body, honed within the context of a given *praxical territory*. The term praxical territory denotes the discipline-specific knowledge we each carry and its imbrication with our wider, lived subjective experience. This fusion of craft and life opens up a “space and place” that reverberates with legacy and landscapes of mutual belongings.

We employ these concepts cognisant of Gerhard’s suggestion that “... a zoopoetic mindfulness of entanglement... makes humans realize that, even in autobiographical voice, the human I is always entangled and in kinship with others” (Gerhardt in Jacobs xiii). There is an ethics to this embodied process of echolocation and reverberation: it resonates with the nomadic, oracular nature of multi-directional living ecosystems, therefore enabling us to articulate an alternative psychophysical intelligence comprising the fabric of affects and entanglements between our bodies of knowledge and our crafted territories of praxis. We regard echolocation as a way to map out a praxical approach that steps away from notions of a fixed or absolute navigational system.

Echolocation and reverberation as dispositifs allow us to cartographically trace and actively invoke our *bios graphias*. A play on the etymology of the word “biography”, which itself harks back to the Greek *bios* (way of living) and *graphia* (record, account), “bios graphia” speaks to the ways in which, while we write, we reach into our lived, praxical experiences, allowing them to be at work and reverberate in the present as a fully-integrated part of our writing process, rather than acting as mere ancillary traces informing our theorising after the fact.

Bios Graphia

I learnt some practices and exercises, deeply.

I have a certain control of my movements, I can manipulate energies.

I can throw, catch, pull and push.

I can fall, spin, scream, sound.

But then

Right on top of my moving lies a history. As a performer, it has always seemed impossible to me not to interweave my own history with my practice. I have built throughout the years a certain cartography of affects, references and companions that permeate everything that I do.

Coming from a colonised country, at the margins of Western civilization, white, but not quite, having lived in many other lands without ever fitting in, my queerness, all the languages I half speak, my over-active body and my broken voice. My student years in Brazil and the theatre groups I was part of. My short career as a waiter in Melbourne which taught me much about caring. My slow PhD research combined with performances, gigs, teachings, lovers and two kids.

Right on top of these histories lie my practices.

Right on top of these practices are my companions.

What follows is a performative, poetic register of writing, which attempts to echolocate the playful, slippery ways in which praxical insights emerge in an almost hieroglyphic fashion in CP, reverberating through collective assemblages, sticky string figures that entangle tacit reflection with personal testimony and group discussion. Moreover, these studio writings echolocate further imbrications between our practices and our theoretical musings, through recourse to digital footage of our training and current artistic project, *La Petite Mort*.^[2]

It is hoped that this particular assemblage can open up spaces in-between, establishing a villageness with you, the reader, in which *bios* can live, embodied memory has agency and time is allowed to twist and intertwine.

Drifting Hands

a fragment from the online performance 'La Petite Mort', January 22, 2021

with Marije Nie, Jonas de Rave, Adriana La Selva, Patrick Campbell, Andrea Maciel

Drifting

I am all adrift. In the studio, with my colleagues from Cross Pollination. We have gathered together and are slowly warming up our bodies and our voices. To begin with, I am immersed in my own body of knowledge, my own unique experience of a praxical territory that is shaped by how I am feeling — my tiredness, my aches and pains, my desires and

needs. But little by little, I become aware of the others in the space. Duos are beginning to emerge; someone begins to throw an imaginary ball to a partner in the space, who reacts, playfully. I think of my own training, inspired by the Odin actress Roberta Carreri, and begin to join in with the imaginary throwing, drawing on my previous experience of this exercise whilst opening up to the particular *frequencies* of my colleagues: the playfulness of the clown, the precision of the somatic practitioner and dancer. Their frequencies shift my intentions, renewing the practice.

When we start to move in the work space, each practitioner draws on their body of knowledge and their actions send out particular *frequencies*. We understand frequency here as a unique actualisation of praxis in the present moment coloured by intention; for example, an action or the immaterial presence of the imaginary ball in the space. Initially these frequencies create a kind of chaotic white noise, in which there is no echolocation possible. As we tune in with our actions the white noise transforms into a live, collective “solution,” a conductive liquid that can carry signals as communication (might we call this “aether”?).

Juggling

Time passes. We tune into one another. Soon all of us are “juggling” invisible balls in the space, playing and reacting to one another, echolocating an emerging, shared territory together. Then someone introduces a song. The action shifts. The flow changes direction. I am attentive to these different energetic currents, to the needs of the collective. The song ends, and I begin to sing, drawing on a repertoire of traditional songs gathered over three decades. It is essential that the song I choose and the quality with which I sing it responds to the unique atmosphere installed, the invisible *aether* connecting us as a living organism. This aether allows for reverberations to carry through the room as we echolocate a common praxical identity in flux. This attentive attunement awakens within me memories of my training with members of the Roy Hart Theatre, it enables me to reconnect to the vocal sources in my body, to the soft chest voice that is feeling-ful and timbrically nuanced. The song ends, the moment passes, I give space to the others. The drift flows onwards...

Drifting into Song — Second fragment from the performance “La Petite Mort”, January 22, 2021, with Andrea Maciel, Patrick Campbell, Adriana La Selva, Jonas de Rave, Marije Nie

In the work, our tactics shape the actions into more and more defined and attuned frequencies, until they reverberate strongly enough with each other to become “audible”, a “PoP”, a eureka moment. New possibilities in between our praxical territories are thus opened to conscious understanding on a collective and/or individual level, and echolocation can be said to have taken place. For instance, when a practitioner speaks of “accidents” in physical comedy, this reverberates with another’s understanding of syncopation and the breaking of rhythms in tap dancing, leading to an echolocation of the principle of “rupture” which is then explored by the whole group.

Gravity Beats

Beats to me are hyperbolic points, which one can approach but never actually reach. The exact pinnacle point of a beat is a mystery, a black hole that we can sense through the gravity it generates, spinning, pulsing. As I skip from beat to beat, time rolls into itself. The memory of the past beats generates the possibility of a future beat to emerge, the expectation of rhythm. It is right there, in between those beats that I can escape its grasp and fly, a rupture in the expectation that allows for difference, a story, a solo.

“Either stop writing or write like a rat!”^[3]

Through our writings a liminal space appears, one that exists on the edges of the cognitive patterns underscoring our practices, a space we curate together. In this space, emergent praxical grammars reverberate, enabling us to echolocate novel territories that blur the boundaries between training, performance and writing. It is through the imminent becoming of our practices playing out together in dialogue in space-time that entanglement occurs. These entanglements echolocate “sticky moments” of different/citation in-between our studio practices and our practices of daily lives. This continuum has become even more present throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, during which we collectively wandered with our creative processes, transforming our living spaces into the studio, and vice versa.

In terms of our use of echolocation and reverberation as dispositifs, we are mindful of Massumi's critique of State Philosophy and representational thinking, which are both predicated on an ideational notion of “truth” underscoring analogical thought:

“State philosophy” is another word for the representational thinking that has characterized Western thinking since Plato [...] it reposes on a double identity: of the thinking subject and of the concepts it creates and to which it lends its own presumed attributes of sameness and constancy. The subject, its concepts, and also the objects in the world to which the concepts are applied have a shared, internal essence: the self-resemblance at the basis of identity [...] The end product would be a fully legitimated subject of knowledge and society — each mind an analogously organized mini-State morally unified in the supermind of the State. (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari, x).

Hence, rather than a trope, the phenomena of echolocation and reverberation operate for us as a complex enunciatory assemblage that offers us nomadic lines of flight from practice to discourse and back again. As Massumi suggests:

“Nomad thought” does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference. It does not respect the artificial division between the three domains of representation, subject, concept, and being; it replaces restrictive analogy with a conductivity that knows no bounds. The concepts it creates do not merely reflect the eternal form of a legislating subject [...] they do not reflect upon the world but are immersed in a changing state of things. A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window. (xiii)

Thus, we now invite the reader to wander through our entangled, nomadic lockdown reflections, which encompass the fusion of life and art, syncopated beats and the establishment of a shared sense of villageness in the desert of isolation.



Screenshots from online performance La Petite Mort With Adriana La Selva.

I want to bake free.

As she prepares to bring the words of Kafka to her kitchen space, the towels in the drier begin to question the performers response-ability towards her human agency in this post anthropocene environment she is creating. Adriana can't perform in theatres anymore. And is aware that as a cultural trope, the epidemic has predominantly been used to embody a nexus of phobias involving existential threats to the social body — she cannot perform her social body anywhere anymore. The towels, the flies craving for bits of crumbs in her sink, Kafka's mole in the burrow and the knife and onion on the table form an assemblage typical from these lockdown crises in any performer's house. A machine that dwells in the thick present of embedded hybrid bodies that eat, love and pray and type type type type. And scroll. She refreshes her lived digital encounters with more-than-other-than-non-humans time after time while completing the construction of a safe burrow. A safe space for her blurred non binary non conforming not very hungry lately identity to experiment. From there, she composites a newcreationanewprojectanewepistemologicalargument during the quietness of the cooking time. I am the mole, my own prisoner and I want to bake free. I want to bake free from the heteronormative subjectivities imposed on my gestures and just make a real good fucking meal. While on her knees collecting the dinner crumbs from the floor with a dustpan she asks: Where are the sensuous entanglements new materialism has promised us? At the end of the day, she comes out of her burrow to practice a somatic walk. Barefoot, she explores the pace of her irregular syncopations and allows for new ontologies to come forth. Between every step, new modes of living and dying in a multispecies world seem to emerge.



Screenshots from video performance *The Burrow*. With Adriana La Selva.

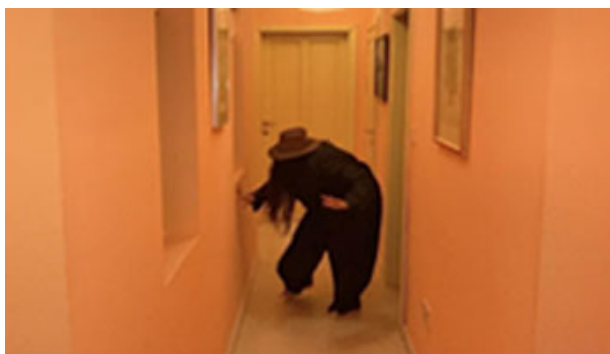
How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope. (Deleuze and Guattari 19).

Funambulism

I am walking on this thin line between art and life as an odd equilibrist. It feels like a circus artist effort but it can also be sensed as the invisible effort of Jean Genet's *funambulist* (2020). All the funambulist wants is to find a perfect, magnetic balance between his centre of gravity and the stretched wire, but the energy is neither in the wire nor in his gravitational centre.

Whilst the funambulist walks across the tightrope, he senses the effort of balance as a result of his life trajectory. His body weight cannot be quantified in kilograms. He carries vigour, tenacity, all his little deaths. He needs to carry regeneration, love, sex, tragedy and rebirth between arms and legs. The force behind the attitude of landing on the wire paradoxically comes from what can vigorously pull the funambulist out of it. He needs to know how to jump in order to know how to drop his weight on the minimum thickness of the wire. He needs to know what snatches him through life.

The energy is in what makes you jump. My work with energy consists in finding ways to feel this leap. My work between healing and performance is about finding the leap that leaps me.



Monster Steps — Recorded during rehearsals of *La Petite Mort*, November 2020. With Marije Nie

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Syncopation or the space in between

If you imagine jumping from beat to beat of a rhythm, which most people can do with surprising accuracy given the complex physics involved, there will be a moment when you hang in the air at the highest point. Neither going up nor down but filled with potential energy, syncopated, balancing the pull of either beat; the one you are leaving and the one you are aiming for. This in-between space can't be measured, it is infinite and unshaped, for a brief moment escaping the expectations of the rhythm, of gravity, of normality.

This particular feeling of syncopation led me to the image of a trapeze artist, swinging regularly, from side to side, establishing a rhythm that becomes "normality." The lowest point of the swing is the beat, the gravitational pull. At both extremes is a moment when the trapeze hangs still in the air, suspended and the acrobat has all the energy at her disposal, to do something, to "act" : to do the trick, the leap, the *salto*. In this suspended moment full of undirected energy, I ache free. All I have invested is mine to use.

Interweaving Monologues — Fragment from a montage etude of rehearsals materials for *La Petite Mort*, December 2020. With Jonas de Rave, Andrea Maciel.

It is by echolocating moments of shared affective and energetic reverberation together through embodied action and reflection that we immerse ourselves in a sense of immanence, a zone of potentiality. These sticky moments — in which it becomes difficult to distinguish one practice from another, or one embodied impulse from another, allow a third "Thing" to emerge — our own small tradition, our own emerging group culture, predicated on certain principles of sharing. We articulate this as a "villageness", a way of becoming together that is at once aesthetic, ontic, epistemic, ethical and political.

Smokin Laban — fragment from CP laboratory session at Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019.

Back together

When all are on the same page in the rhythm, and approaching the beats with the same "sense" of time, a group can get "locked in", reverberating in a tight channel of beats and syncopations established together. But as every beat releases its energy, the density of the rhythm grows. In this locked-in mode, there is less room for lines of flight. When a solo rises up, it doesn't tell its own story. Rather it sticks to the geography of the groove tightly, using its velocity to move and swing.

And groove?

Groove appears when all players are on the same page regarding time; they are all connected to the same points of gravity, *but they keep their own relationship to the beats alive, using their own sense of timing*. They are surfing the beat, becoming together, not waiting or leaning on one another.

Juggle — Fragment from CP session at Odin Teatret in Holstebro (DK). With Joaquim Carlos Bezerra de Carvalho, Ramiro Silveira, Gonzalo Alarcon, Sara Holm Strandby, Alex Boyd, Andrea Maciel, Adriana La Selva, Marije Nie.

Identity as an Inventory of Traces

In between M's steps I find space to spin a spoon in my cup of coffee. I pull a lion on a leash carefully acknowledging the energetic centres A has found in me. P's intentions dancing precisely through his arms and eyes gives me space to knot myself up in bed and point out the chaos and screams which we both eagerly try to control. I feel the rhythms of their impulses helping me to craft my images, to craft our images on screen. I hear them singing and acknowledge with peace that at first I'm always afraid. But also that I'll catch up. We'll tune. I'll grow strong and get along.

Rolling out of the studio-writing

The drift comes to an end. We have echolocated with you the space in between the lines, in between the songs, the training and our words, entangling our thoughts and actions with you, the reader, stringing together these different moments in time and place like the rhythms of dancing steps. Now, as we find ourselves here, together on the edge of this text, walking yet another tightrope, listening to the silent aether that is full of reverberations, we let go.



Parade — Rehearsal of La Petite Mort in 2020. With Jonas de Rave, Patrick Campbell, Adriana La Selva, Marije Nie, Andrea Maciel.

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Endnotes

1. For an account of Cross Pollination working tactics, please see <http://crosspollination.space/>. ↑.

2. *La Petite Mort* is a performance developed by Cross Pollination as a part of CROP, the collective's production house. Liberally inspired by the writing of Juan Rulfo and Herman Melville, this 'dual performance', composed of both a proximal (studio) performance and an online version, interweaves live music, tap dance, multimedia and theatre to explore the yearning and the longing to connect in times of isolation and social distancing. ↑.
3. Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:240. ↑.