

Assessment 3

Essay

keystroke

How does improvised dance relate to anarchist politics?

Through my experiences with improvised dance, I have frequently noticed ideas expressed throughout our practise and readings can be seen as sympathetic to anarchist ideals. While this could be explained with the simplistic definition of neither having rules, the popular conception of anarchy being a state of chaos and lawlessness obscures the actual political definition and complex history of the movement.

Anarchism can be broadly described as a movement for negating non-consensual hierarchies in favour of building horizontal social and political structures. The sympathies and sometimes direct upholding of these basic ideals can be found through the decentralisation of dance, the defeat of choreography, and how those ideas intertwine with an intersectionalist movement for personal freedom. This essay seeks to examine my experiences and explore how improvised dance can be an expression of anarchism.

I first considered an anarchist perspective on improvised dance during the fifth seminar, while we were covering the works of William Forsythe. In *Improvised Dance: (In)Corporeal Knowledges* (Wait, 2023) one of the concepts Wait unpacks is how dance has become increasingly democratised over time dance as an industry and improvisation's role in that. Wait argues that as the dance industry globalised, dancers who may work with many different choreographers began to change the choreography to suit their particular movement sensibilities more, and thus taking partial ownership of the work as a "creative agent" and not merely performing the choreographer's vision. This results in a collective authorship, acknowledging the contribution of the dancer. She goes on to reference Forsythe and some of his ideas.

Forsythe's ideas on improvised dance were introduced in his own *Improvisation Technologies: A tool for the analytical dance eye* (Forsythe et al., 1999). Here he explicitly states that "the purpose of improvisation is to defeat choreography", as choreography can be seen as a form of hierarchy. There is a clear connection from this thought to anarchist ideas, choreography is restraining dance and by defeating it we can use what Forsythe considers "primarily dancing", finding new ways to dance that are impossible under a choreographed structure. When practising Forsythe's techniques I found that they were very intense, requiring extremely fast and forward thinking in able to keep ahead of the extremely fluid motion, switching between rules in an instant. Forsythe explains that this is intentional, using improvisation that is "irreproducible due to their

temporal complexity” and therefore impossible to do with choreography.

Seminar eight introduced *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Goldman, 2010) which brought with it a rich history of improvised dance and the ideas informed by them. One of the ways anarchists seek to negate unjust hierarchies is through freedom from oppression. Goldman’s reading reflects this as she states that contrary to popular use, freedom is not “a desired endpoint” but rather a continuous process that looks different for separate groups and requires a great deal of intersectionality. She relates this to how improvised dance involves “giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape”, providing the dancer a space to have “critical engagement with the world” to explore their place in and prepare to react to it. In my own dancing I found this reflected in my solo performance, where I tried to be both vulnerable, as myself, and reactive to the world by working those into my score and using them in my dance.

The further reading in week 10 introduced us to The Grand Union through *Terpsichore in sneakers: post-modern dance* (Banes, 2011), going over the group’s birth out of Yvonne Rainer’s *CP-AD* project and how it formed into a dance group with “hierarchy and democracy” at the forefront.

Reading about The Grand Union as the question was being pieced together for this essay came with the realisation that the group embraced anarchist ideals wholeheartedly. In reading his 1972 article on the formation of the group, Steve Paxton explicitly describes it as an “anarchistic democratic theatre collective” (Paxton, 1972), and Rainer, who had formed the precursor group to The Grand Union, had grown up around Italian anarchists, and later in her life has come out as a lesbian explaining some of the queer elements of the group (Rainer, 2006).

In addition to merely talking about anarchism and not publicly having a leader, The Grand Union followed these ideas in their performances too. While there was no leader of the group in general, each dance gave the opportunity for the performers to decide for themselves if they wanted to follow anyone or any particular movement, while they are free to lose interest and break off (Perron, 2020). The open discussion of consent – a vital component of anarchist philosophy – is encouraged, letting the audience see as scenes are negotiated in-front of them (Banes, 2011).

The anarchist sympathies of The Grand Union even carried forwards into its member’s future works as Hannah Yohalem writes about in her article *Displacing Vision: Contact Improvisation, Anarchy, and Empathy* (Yohalem, 2018). Here Yohalem argues that Paxton further developed the theories of The Grand Union into contact improvisation, using “the anarchist political values of mutual aid and individual freedom”. This was done by creating contact improvisation as a way to “benefit each dancer” without having to give up their identity to the group, in stark contrast to American democracy

which requires both a losing side and for all participants to be subsumed into the group.

Components The Grand Union pioneered were present in the group improvisation, though maybe not consciously. The ability for any member of the group to choose to lead a movement and others to follow or break away spontaneously is reminiscent of their structure although not unique to them. The negotiation of consent however, especially during a performance, isn't something seen in most group improvisations. This is an extremely useful and powerful tool for working with partners, actively making sure that they are comfortable with the activities as they occur. More similar to acting improvisation was something I felt more comfortable experimenting with in a group setting after reading, and can add a unique texture to a group improvisation that can't be replicated in a solo performance.

While there are many different political ideas involved in improvisation, a clear link exists between improvisation and anarchist thought and beliefs. Different improvisational thought leaders have sought to use improvisation as a tool to dismantle hierarchies, build horizontal political structures and do so with intersectionality in mind. Using dance as a form of political expression is not new, however with the relatively recent emergence of improvisational dance we are seeing the emergence of clear anarchist expression through it.

References

- Banes, S. (2011). The grand union: The presentation of everyday life as dance. In *Terpsichore in sneakers: Post-modern dance* (pp. 203–218). Wesleyan University Press.
- Forsythe, W., Bürkle, C., Gelber, N. D., McManus, T., Pite, C., & Sulcas, R. (1999). *William forsythe: Improvisation technologies: A tool for the analytical dance eye*. ZKM in cooperation with Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln.
- Goldman, D. (2010). Introduction: The land and the free. In *I want to be ready: Improvised dance as a practice of freedom* (pp. 1–27). University of Michigan Press.
- Paxton, S. (1972). The grand union. *The Drama Review*, 16(3), 128–134. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144779>
- Perron, W. (2020). *The grand union : Accidental anarchists of downtown dance, 1970-1976*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Rainer, Y. (2006). *Feelings are facts: A life*. MIT Press.
- Wait, N. (2023). *Improvised dance: (in)corporeal knowledges*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003369011-1>
- Yohalem, H. (2018). Displacing vision: Contact improvisation, anarchy, and empathy. *Dance Research Journal*, 50(2), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767718000220>