



Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity

16 Lovers, Reykjavík #5

By: Ida-Elisabeth Larsen

Months back, I think it was during the winter of 2013, Fanclub approached me upon receiving confirmation that a Nordic tour of their latest production DEATH would be possible to schedule. They explained to me that they were concerned about the current culture of touring, which to them felt somewhat depleted, presenting work but not having time to establish an understanding of the different contexts and cities visited under such circumstances. Fanclub was interested in doing something different. Something that would in one way or the other engage or at least to some extent make conversation with the local communities of makers and audiences. So, with this in mind we developed together a little side project called Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity. It was thought out to manifest itself through three different initiatives; a series of moderated talks between Fanclub, myself and whomever else would be interested in participating. The talks would discuss openly the way Fanclub functioned as a collective and how they organised themselves in periods of producing stage works. The project also included a series of interviews with local artist collectives and finally we talked of formulating a small article, which would somehow unfold further some of the ideas about collectivity discovered along the way.

This is an excerpt from an interview done in May, 2014 with a member of the democratic performance group 16 Lovers based in Iceland. I met Hlynur Páll Pálsson in the little café inside Tjarnabíó; an newly restored independent theatre in Reykjavík. This is a conversation about one of the biggest collectives I've ever been introduced to and how they've decided, at least for the sake of the experiment, to appoint an artistic leader for their next work and leave the flat structure with it's never-ending debates behind. Besides Hlynur Páll Pálsson 16 Lovers consists of the members Aðalbjörg Þóra Árnadóttir, Brynja Björnsdóttir, Davíð Freyr Þórunnarson, Eva Rún Snorradóttir, Friðgeir Einarsson, Gunnar Karel Mátsson, Karl Ágúst Þorbergsson, Ragnar Ísleifur Bragason, Saga Sigurðardóttir and Ylfa Ösp Áskelsdóttir.

IE: So maybe you could just introduce yourself and what you do?

H: So, my name is Hlynur Páll Pálsson and as of recently I'm the managing director of Reykjavík Dance Festival. I've also been working with the City Theatre as a project manager and stage manager, but now I just got promoted. It's a bit overwhelming as it all happened at the same time; I got this new job and the promotion at the City Theatre, where I'll now be working as an artistic consultant. In terms of back ground I've been working in theatres since I was 16 in almost all possible positions, from direction to set design. I studied comparative literature at the university where after I continued my studies at the Arts Academy here in Iceland. This is where our performance group 16 Lovers started. We were theatre makers, performance artists, a visual artist, two actors and a composer, so all these people from different art fields that joined together.

IE: What kind of work does 16 lovers do?

H: The project that we are working on at the moment will be our fifth big show since we started collaborating in 2008. We try to make one piece together every other year. Usually our shows are based on an idea that we research on quite extensively. For example, one of the shows we did was based on our research into Nigerian scam methods, which you might know from these emails you receive once in a while stating that you've won a lot of money. We started these interesting dialogues with different scammers, or scam artists, around the world.

Another example is the last show we did which was called 'The Spectacle of the Year'. It was based on a survey we did investigating what the Icelandic population would like to experience on stage. We asked them about what colours they preferred, if they preferred comedies or dramas and so forth. Their answers were then paired up with information about their political views, their age, their education etc. Finally we got this report and it was like 150 pages long. We found out that people want to see the colour blue on stage, and that they would like to experience things that make them laugh. We also found out that left wing people want to experience sadness, you know, feel guilty over the injustices in the world, whereas right wing people want to laugh and see nudity. In the show we divide the audience according to the statistics we found in the report, and lead them in groups through a series of performances that their data told us they'd enjoy.

IE: And did they enjoy their allegedly preferred shows?

H: Yeah! We won the official performance award in Iceland in the category for what could be translated as 'Best Newcomer' or 'Most Avant-garde Show'. So it must have affected our audience in a positive way, right?

IE: In a more methodological sense, how do you work in 16 Lovers?

H: In terms of organisation we have up until now worked in a flat structure with no leader, which means that all decisions are made by the group as a whole. It's a really difficult working method, which is why we've decided to appoint an artistic director for the next project we are doing, just to simplify things for us. Our shows are usually very interactive. We work with dividing the audience into smaller groups and then leading them around a certain route or structure. We try to get them to mingle and interact with other groups in different ways. So you know, our shows are not necessarily easy on the audience. Content wise we produce quite conceptual work. And that's

the most challenging part of our process; understanding how to translate our research into a practical performance. That whole aspect takes up 90% of the whole process, the question of how something can become performative. It really is a very difficult process. Usually, only two weeks before the premiere, something happens, and all of a sudden things fall into place. It's like the fundamental structure for the show appears, and then we spend the remaining time finishing the performance.

A director once told me that the process of making a performance consists of 70% of just doing stuff and trying stuff and accumulating matter, and then at one point, everybody loses faith, and that's usually around the 70% line, and if you manage to restore your faith then you spend the last 30% of the process making a performance. But you have to lose faith. You have to pass through that moment of crisis.

IE: How many people does 16 Lovers consist of?

H: We are 11 at the moment.

IE: Fuck, that's a big collective!

H: Yeah! Fucking big collective.

IE: Have you been so many since the beginning?

H: No, it started out as a trio, then four other people joined and then another two and so forth. So, at the moment we are eleven. We've never been so many before. During the last show we were only ten. The last member we invited into the group is a choreographer, cause we thought we needed a choreographer.

IE: Is it your aim to reach 16 members?

H: We've often talked about it. The dream is to reach 16 at some point in the future, but we're not rushing it. You know, we are not asking around or actively looking in that sense. It's just like, you know, at some point in the future we will need something, some skill or some person with some particular asset and then the collective will expand according to that.

IE: How do you organise yourselves as a collective when you are 11 people? You must have endless email threads?

H: We've done the endless emailing thing, but we found it worked better to just have a closed Facebook group where it's quite easy to comment on things and drop research material. We try our best to maintain having a monthly production meeting. Our work method has not really changed much since the first production in the sense that we try to meet for two weeks of workshop periods. We just did one now last month. In the time between the workshops we don't necessarily meet up so much or talk. We let the information settle in our bodies and in our minds and then when we meet up again we look at each others reflections and ideas together. We also develop material in the frame of some simple game structures where we move around, or use a dice or some other kind of random factor to mix combinations of ideas, material, choices etc.

IE: Can you say a little bit more about why you at this point have chosen to appoint an artistic director among you? Is it a conceptual choice?

H: No, the reason is more practical. Definitely. The last time we worked in this flat, collective structure there was always this point in time in which we would get stuck. Where nothing happened in a more non-constructive sense. We were talking too much, debating. This situation of sitting around the table together didn't really help our process. Eventually we decided during our work on The Spectacle of the Year that we would work one week at a time with an appointed leader. Each one of us then had a week of leading the process, meaning we had to make sure everybody was working, and had homework, or some information from which more material could be developed. We found that this approach worked OK, but there was also something problematic about only leading a process for a week. It was as if you could never really follow an idea fully before a new person had to take over. Now we've decided to make one of the founding members of 16 Lovers our artistic director. He's graduating from a fine arts program in Berlin now and as a part of his thesis he's conceptualised a work for us. All decisions are still debated in the group, but he will have the final say in it, in a way.

IE: Have you talked about what such a decision will mean for the kind of work you'll produce in the future?

H: The decision of having appointed a leader feels quite natural in relation to where we are as a collective at the moment. He's one of the founding members and he's the most pedagogical one of us. He's also a very good dramaturge. We've not talked too much about potential consequences of this decision, but what we do hope is that it will reduce potential friction within the group. I don't think the dynamics of working will change so much. Even though he is the artistic director, it will not be the position of a tyrant. Most decisions will still be the result of the group reaching a place of consensus together. He will have veto power though. You know, he can say "let's stop talking about this now" and this may become problematic for us in the beginning as we get used to this new structure. We are lucky in a way because we are called 16 Lovers, and that basically means that we are all very lovely people. We usually manage to resolve issues without being too dramatic.

For more info on 16 Lovers see: www.16elskendur.is

For more info on Fanclub see: www.fanclubdance.com

Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity
was made possible with the support
of Nordic Culture Fund.