



Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity

PotatoPotato, Malmö #2

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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 another engage, or at least to some extent make conversation, with the local communities of makers and audiences. So, with this in mind we worked together to develop a little side project called Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity.

We imagined it manifesting itself through three different initiatives; a series of talks, a series of interviews and a subsequent article. Firstly, the series of moderated talks – between Fanclub, myself, and whomever else would be interested in participating – would discuss openly the way Fanclub functioned as a collective and how they organised themselves in periods of producing stage works. Secondly, the series of interviews with local artist collectives discussing their works, methods, etc. And lastly, the formulation of a small article, which would further expand upon some of the ideas about collectivity discovered along the way.

This is an excerpt from an interview done in April, 2014 with the stage-arts collective PotatoPotato in Malmö, Sweden. I met this collective at a traditional Swedish patisserie where we placed ourselves comfortable among pink wall paper and colourful sponge cakes. These are some of their reflections on what it means to have a theatre space of your own and on the importance of diversity (also) on an institutional level. PotatoPotato is Freja Hallberg, Linda Forsell, Jenny Möller Jensen, Helena Engberg and Paulina Göth.

How did you meet and what was the motivation to form PotatoPotato?

Well, 5/12 years ago the city of Malmö sent out an open call. They were looking for new people to take over a bigger space meant primarily for cultural purposes. It was a big application. You needed to present a three-year plan including examples of events, a budget, artistic visions, local objectives and so forth. Freja Hallberg saw this call and contacted a group of people she knew who were interested in theatre, and together we were able to complete an application and send it in. Eventually we didn't get the space, but that's how we met. As it turned out we all missed something as theatre makers in Malmö. It is very difficult to get in to the established scene here, and we all felt that it presented a discourse that needed to be challenged. We wanted to be political together. That's basically how PotatoPotato was formed. Now we are five women working full time. Sometimes we invite different collaborators to work with us on particular projects. In PotatoPotato we make different types of stage artistic works, both for the stage and site specific. Among us we split the roles of teaching, directing, producing and performing. We also have quite an elaborated interest in drag. We teach drag and organise drag nights with dj'ing.

So you are five women working full time. Do you have your own space?

Well, at the moment we have a small office, but this summer we'll be taking over a much bigger space. In a way it's kind of funny because we started out by applying for a space together and now here we are, almost 6 years later, and we are finally getting one. It's great because we really enjoy working and expanding collectively. It's not always been possible for us to invite other people to work with us because of a lack of space and funding. You know, so far we've had to rent space in order to rehearse, rent an office to do our administrative work and we've also had to rent a stage to present our work. All in all, the current circumstances are very expensive and not very flexible. So it's going to be much easier with this new space, which will provide us with both stage, rehearsal space, storage and an office area.

How are you financing it?

We will be paying the rent by ourselves. It's been difficult because we've been looking for a space for so long, and no one really seemed to want to help us. Now we just went ahead and made it happen ourselves.

How do you organise yourselves in PotatoPotato?

On a practical level the way we organise ourselves is very fluid because we've not had a fixed place to work from. We are of course curious to see how that might change when we get this new frame to work in. Soon we can work on production related things while others are rehearsing at the same time without any of us having to get on our bikes and go somewhere else.

On a more structural level we are also very fluid. Yet at the same time we are also very much aware of what each one of us are good at, which means we are fast at distributing different tasks between us. Lately with this aspect of taking over the new space there's been a lot of administrative work. In this way we know that we are stepping into a sort of new territory, with new requirements and responsibilities. We are just now growing into this new collective costume, so to speak.

It's been an interesting journey for us to be together in this way and to keep on re-finding our mutual places within such a structure as the collective one. For us it is not just a modus for working, it's also a personal support, which happen to be present through all stages of our lives. With the integration of those two sides of life it makes the collective a very generous form. We take care of all aspects of our common ground. It has taken us a long time to develop the awareness and the skills to do that. We've worked together for almost 6 years and learnt how to take responsibility for the group, for ourselves and for the work. This is a very interesting aspect, that being in a collective is something that you have to learn. The question is, how and where can we teach people to exist collectively, to communicate collectively? Here in Sweden we are never really encouraged to

work together in this way, we are only taught how to be critical towards ourselves and towards each other. It's not that the collective structure is un-critical, but it's a different kind of critical.

Do you have some speculations on what kind of consequences it will have for your collective now that you are moving from being more of an independent group to stepping into a more institutional form?

It's impossible to predict in detail what this will mean for us in the future. In terms of the context in which we are placed, the politicians here require that all independent groups behave more or less like small institutions. In that sense we feel like this chance to expand through this new space, ironically enough might give us more freedom. We'll have more of a say in terms of what we want to present and what kind of artists we want to support and collaborate with.

When we've had meetings with politicians or other funding officials they comment on names in our applications of artists that are unknown to them and then we have to justify our choices. This leaves us in a position where we might feel like inviting new or unknown artists to work with us could weaken our chances of receiving funding. It's horrible. However, with this new space we can work with whoever we want to work with because we now have access to funds that support the running of the space over 1 year. This as opposed to having to continuously apply for the realisation of singular projects. As I said, I think we will be more free to decide what we want to do and how we want to organise things around us. Basically, we are really looking forward to this new fold in our collective time together.

And what do you think about the institutional aspects of this new form you are about to enter?

What I think about that is that we have to maintain also a diversity of institutions. We can't just have the big formal ones. We have to figure out what it means to have a different kind of institution as well in order to make sure that a dialogue is possible at all. It's like the discussion on gender; everybody seems to be interested in masculinity, but we should also be investigating other modes of identity. Basically, a diverse society is the kind of society we want to live and work in. When you have to adopt into a specific institutional thinking, things tends to become very one-dimensional. What does it mean to exist in a life of many institutional proposals? That is a far more interesting thought to be occupied with (...)

For more info on PotatoPotato see: www.potatopotato.se

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

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