Fugitive Dance

Counter-censorship strategies for a disappearing future

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Counter-censorship strategies for a disappearing future

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'Censorship is a productive form of power: it is not merely privative, but formative as well.' (Butler 1998: 252)

Utilizing practice-based artistic research, this project analyses censorship in cultural and political terms and the ways in which the counter-cultural realm offers us a place from which to question the possibilities of using various dance strategies to constitute (or even dismantle) the future. Censorship, which we might define as restrictions, notices, fines and even punishments on materials and the producers of these materials, attempts to anticipate the effects of religion, morals and politics through the common mechanisms of prohibition, banning or elimination. Power structures are constantly preoccupied with what is coming, with controlling the form of the future and the political and economic consequences of that future; 'if power is, however, also productive, then it contributes to making the object that it also constrains' (Butler 1998: 247). This insistence by power to intervene in cultural and artistic production reveals the relevance of our own production at these levels and reminds us that artists tend to participate in the future they expect to have. The future is made through this causal relationship established by censorship, when banning and force editing works and artistic production. Thus, our ability to understand and work within these logics as we try to dismantle them through our own artistic practices is one of the fugitive routes of escape from these power narratives. We can imagine other futures that are not necessarily causal, predictable or profitable, but are able to draw on other drives and values that can constitute other ecologies.

These investigations have been carried out through the choreographic research project titled *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*,

■ Figure 1. *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, 26 September 2018.
l–r: Óscar Hernández, Roberto García, Ignacio de Antonio (director).
Courtesy of La Casa Encendida

directed by myself and performed by myself, Óscar Hernández, and Roberto García in Bogotá in 2017. In *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, three dancers perform a movement routine, choreographed with objects and materials, while they talk about dance works that they would never perform (fig. 1). This list of dance pieces is not treated as form but as a series, an archive of recent Western contemporary dance. It is an exercise to elaborate on a kind of critical repository from the memory of the performers, where the subjectivation and limitations of the creator operates on the same level as the movement routine and the spatial creations seen on the stage. For the entire duration of the piece, the three performers talk about scenic works they would never enact. Each statement begins with a negative conditional phrase (that is, 'I would not do/put/have …'). The condition, subject or decision made in each phrase leads us to imagine, without revealing the motives or restrictions, a panorama of twenty different scenic works that we are not doing nor would be willing to do.

As dance deals with temporal issues (particularly its position in a radical present) and maintains critical relations with archiving, reproduction, audience participation and exhibition, it is an ideal agent from which to frame this conversation. Dance has the potential to occur within its own disappearance, to produce without a relationship to visibility, to appear in the mere existence of bodies and their relationship with time and other materials. That is to say, dance allows us to catch glimpses of the

certain tactical possibilities of elusive fugitiveness towards capitalism and to find the gaps that allow us to build other possibilities. Through a dialectical analysis of my work *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen* with three other choreographic works we will explore the fugitive strategies of negation, vibration and imagination. The four dance works are staged in front of an audience by a group of performers dancing and articulating different texts. The works are *NEW* by the company Lupita Pulpo (Ayara Hernández and Felix Marchand), *Make It, Don't Fake It* by artists Julián Pacomio and Ángela Millano, and *Negarlo todo* (Deny Everything) by the choreographer Florencia Martinelli. Negation and other conditional utterances are a form of language performativity that conducts the political imaginary. The vibratory potential of material (things and bodies) points to the potential of dance to establish new ecological panoramas for unpredictable ways of being and organizing together. Imagination and memory can be viewed as strategies to disrupt present–future logics and the memoir-repertoire can be seen as an archival strategy in the field of dance.

WE SHOULD NOT, SO WE WOULD

Censorship can be understood as a kind of choreographic thought as it concerns the circulation, distribution and visibility of things. The censorship apparatus is a choreographic mechanism of control for what things will be on display and moving in front of an audience. Those who apply censorship are often doing this work on behalf of some authority. Beyond that, one of the subtlest forms of censorship is a kind that artists themselves might embody in the course of production: self-censorship. Counter-censorship then should be understood as all those strategies and mediations that have been developed to reverse the effects of censorship, even those that subvert the logic of censorship to make more present or visible that which should be removed from circulation or could never be published.

In *Negarlo todo* (Deny Everything), there are four performers on a set that looks like a rehearsal room for a rock band. They are surrounded by several microphones, some amplifiers and a small percussion set (fig. 2). At the beginning, one of the

■ Figure 2. *Negarlo todo*, Montevideo, 13 June 2019. *l-r*: Florencia Martinelli (director), Vera Garat. *Photo Paola Nande, courtesy of the artist*

performers plays the bass without much expertise and with a low level of theatricality. Another performer plays on the percussion set and the last performer is in front of the microphone. The bass and the percussion lines have a definite rhythmic presence but poor musicality. It all sounds like soft punk from the 1990s. The performer at the microphone begins to sing: 'I'm not Uruguayan, I'm not a choreographer, I'm not an artist …' The whole work is a list of sentences following this structure: a statement preceded by the mantra of 'I'm not …' The reiterated self-negation extends throughout the work in two layers. First, as an obvious and direct 'no', where the language, with its performative capacity, states what is not or would not be. Second, it confronts the negation of what it actually is and, in that confrontation, what has been denied appears as highlighted and hyper-visible. Denying or declaring an intention of not being or not doing, is a strategy to take on the complexities and paradoxes of subjectification and freedom of expression from a position of direct dissidence. Denying the obvious tactically unfolds and opens up spaces of doubt and crisis within the construction of reality, revealing an operational space for representation and the disruptive performativity of ambiguity. The cynical use of negative utterance, in addition to the insistence on a list form, this almost mantra, allows the text in both works to emerge as a provocation. Asking us to assume the limitations of being an artist and citizen in terms of visibility and the ways in which we self-represent. A double reading emerges: what you see in the moment of articulation may or may not be a representation of 'the real'. As a reader or as a spectator you can also choose to assume that both utterances are accurate reflections of reality.

Self-censorship mainly operates through the vectors of fear and danger. Some future condition is established that produces a premonitory, causal, subaltern relationship between what is done and its effects. Indeed, censorship mechanisms are based on imagination and the construction of the future. Self-censorship, as a mode of self-representation, is a political apparatus that operates with the same effectiveness as the mechanisms of ideological, moral and political censorship while also adding layers of subjectivity as they are related to the

■ Figure 3. *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, 26 September 2018. Performer Óscar Hernández. *Courtesy of La Casa Encendida*

economy and the immediate consequences of production. Investigating the dramaturgical and performative aspects of censorship within dance allows us to develop strategies (or choreopolitical mechanisms) to escape its brutality. However, even as we explore self-censorship in a critical and elusive way, censorship has already entered the dynamics of production. As Judith Butler elaborates in 'Ruled out: Vocabularies of the censor':

> [I]t is crucial to understand that censorship, as a productive form of power, may work in implicit and inadvertent ways. As a productive form of power, censorship loses its usual meaning, and it becomes unclear whether 'censorship' still works to describe this operation of power. (Butler 1998: 249)

The connection between the future and censorship is delicate. While censorship can be understood as a technology for the construction of subjects and objects, its definitive constitution can only be met in a (more or less) distant future. The operations executed by the counter-censorship apparatus seem to dismantle and deform a future that seems to be a given.

An understanding of political ecology (Bennett 2010: 94) teaches us that each thing is not exclusively what it is in itself but, rather, it is made of the interdependent relationships that it establishes with others. Thus, those excerpts, complete works or artists that have disappeared (and continue to disappear) due to different forms of censorship participate in future scenarios even in their absence. In other words, they have already activated their future political agency. Dance and choreographic research provides a space through which we might address the political potential of relationships and the agency of things that are not here anymore. How is it that things that do not move or that do not exist a priori affect our political relationships, our movements? How can these things move us? Jane Bennett has enquired about the political agency of matter and its vibratory condition. She refers to the vitality of matter and its potential to intervene as a non-human actant in our interactions. In the preface of her book *Vibrant Matter* she asks the question, 'How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?' (Bennett 2010: vii).

During the work *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, most of the movement is about the relationship between the three performers and a collection of artificially processed materials, mainly plastics, foams, rubber and aluminum. Centuries of heavy industrial extraction and extensive biopolitical

Figure 4. *Make It, Don't Fake It*, 'Frecuencia singular plural', CentroCentro, Madrid, 26 April 2019. Performer Julián Pacomio. *Photo Galerna, courtesy of the artist*

control of populations have made possible the processing and wide-scale production of these materials. All of this human activity has produced a series of irreversible changes to the planet. All of this history, these movements of material and of bodies, is embedded within the work. Through a dance vocabulary, we produce a series of movements and routines to build ephemeral installations. Precarious constructions that we disassemble only to reassemble into new shapes; a ceaseless flow of useless and unproductive labour. The spatial placement of the audience in two rows invites a cross-vision, where the work takes place literally in the space between the two groups. This passive and emancipated position of the spectator, sheltered in their usual area with indirect lighting, creates a sense of conflict as the audience observes themselves reflected in the other group. This conflict is emphasized in those moments when there is nothing (and nobody) on the stage. The image is only that of an expectant audience. This kind of spatial organization of the audience raises some questions about what is visible and available for both bodies that are on stage and for the viewers of those bodies.

In the piece *Make It, Don't Fake It*, Pacomio and Millano work directly with objects and materials of industrial origin. In their case, the objects and materials themselves make specific and individual interventions within the space. Some of the objects contain motors that give them the ability to perform small mechanical movements. Other objects have been placed prior to the audience's entrance in marked positions and fixed by elements such as tape, nails or small chains (fig. 4). During the piece, the performers place themselves near these objects and, with small loops of repetitive movements, establish a dialectical relationship with each one (fig. 5). The relationship that emerges between the mechanical body of the performer and the animated, articulated object is one of equals – a possible dance governed by object–object/subject–object relations. Through this work, the audience may discover new political configurations (ecologies) between the human and non-human. This process of producing actant equality through movement is a vibratory kind of play that offers us a glimpse of other possibilities for existing with and as material. Within

the vibratory capacity of matter we find the possibility of becoming vibrational bodies. Sharp limits disappear and new strategies for existence emerge from the blur. As dance artists, subjected to precarious self-employed labour, imagining these new realities, which may be difficult to recognize, allow us to glimpse the possibilities provided by disappearance or elimination for the emergence of new ecologies.

WE WOULD NOT, SO WE WOULD

'Where does the value of a cultural work come from?' (Groys 2014: 13). The future is a constant forward motion – a continuous acceleration in which we unwittingly participate. The future narrative is speculated with the new as its ultimate value. Always moving forward, always something new, the future is related with the acceleration of this era, with the anxiety of the new. The anticipation for and the speed of information is part of how power structures reify their hierarchies. However, there is also cultural value in the new, or the genuine. In the areas of art theory and politics, Groys analyses various qualities of the new from a postmodernist perspective and proposes an operation for moving values from one context to another. In the last several decades, the presence of the global archive has multiplied exponentially, both in size and in the possibility of access. Groys argues that 'the new is a cultural-economic phenomenon; hence it cannot be based solely on individual memory and the individual power of discrimination' (2014: 47).

NEW, by Lupita Pulpo, is a performative exploration of the possibilities of disruption of the present (an immediate past–future relation). It uses the convention of the theatrical black box – a black dance floor, a black backdrop, general theatrical lighting, a front-facing audience and three performers on stage. The performers begin telling one another a series of choreographic instructions and then executing them with a certain calmness (fig. 6). Once they have created enough energy for the proposal to be understood, they say: 'This has been done.' As a work of personal and archival memory, they review pieces that have already been seen and propose possible pieces for an immediate present. In the last minutes of the piece, after a blackout,

Figure 5. *Make It, Don't Fake It*, 'Frecuencia singular plural', CentroCentro, Madrid, 26 April 2019. Performer Ángela Millano. *Photo Galerna, courtesy of the artist*

they inject a manifesto, by making a series of statements about the future. The work insists that the idea of newness and the genuine is an imposed requirement from both institutions and from the artists themselves. The requirement for new vocabularies or new cultural industries, for constant innovation and creativity reproduces the logic of the neoliberal economy. Thus, the future that is profitable is the one in which our decisions as citizens and artists can be amortized by the imperative for the New.

What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen attempts to establish a critical practice in relation to the archive, both that one to which we are referring and the one in which we are creating. We elaborate on a strategy to collectively imagine other pieces that could be happening on the stage but that are not happening (fig. 7). The list of works presented in the performance that we would not do are plausible pieces in terms of technology, production and size. They are presented with a desire to mobilize the audience, but this occurs through the production of a contradictory gesture. While the audience

Figure 6. *NEW*, FIDCU, Montevideo, 15 May 2013. L–R: Ayara Hernández, Felix Marchand. *Photo Nacho Correa, courtesy of the artist*

is watching one choreographic work, they are also imagining that they are watching another, different work. In that displacement, a fissure opens up that evokes the question: what is stopping the performers from carrying out the alternative choreographies? What are these other pieces the performers are talking about? The work is a speculation about possibilities that offers no clarification on whether these possibilities will ever come to be or if the reasons why they will not occur are related to the past, present or future. It is a speculative game where the future is built and dismantled in the same sentence. 'I would not do the following …' opens an uncertain space where the future loses priority.

In *NEW*, the work focuses on the impossibility of producing something new (in that game, the future will conform with that which has already been produced) while in *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, a condition that denies the desire or intention to produce what has already been produced is created. Both proposals use the archive as a resource from which to produce the conditions of the new. The potential of imagination as political tool in this regard is crucial. '[I]magination is

thinking of something that is not what you are seeing. It is not just that you are thinking of something absent or unperceived' (Cvejic 2018). In *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, the proposal recognizes that not everything has been done but that we can choose to no longer produce anything.

In fact, the very idea of the future as 'that which comes later' already assumes a certain univocal linearity of time. In this linear logic, the future is disappearance. As we approach the future it disappears from this moment and appears at a more distant moment. From its own critical limits based on movement, dance can produce a softening of these conditions. It draws a fugitive route through time that allows us to stretch the political potential of any moment. Proposing/Speculating on ways of doing and being without the imposition of the new or the genuine, distances us from the reproductive inertia of capitalism. Through the mobilization of things, assuming a dynamic relationship with materials, and by letting oneself be affected by absences, dance is a realm where one can rethink and reformulate their relationship with time, and, therefore, with the future.

WE WOULD NOT, SO WE WOULD NOT NOT

Arriving at the future is an impossible endeavour. The fugitivity and non-visibility of power has cornered and trapped certain artistic practices, but this has opened up spaces from which we can generate strategic abilities and situations that do not respond to the logics of this power. Dance, or possibly post-dance, can create a fissure in this projection of a determinate future. 'Post-dance is when dance and choreography reclaim, and successfully, their autonomy and in a totally new way' (Spångberg 2017: 391). Post-dance, conceptually introduced in 2016 by Mårten Spångberg at a conference at MDT in Stockholm, Sweden, is not a term that has been codified in any sort of consensual way. However, when using the Post- prefix on dance, we may reclaim autonomy to produce dance critically and move beyond the field's own expectations, leaving space to attend to new scenarios and ecosystems, to use the tools of dance to queer our relation with things, visibility and time.

Post-dance proposes thought and action beyond its own rank and therefore it is impossible to know what it will be for sure. We can only say that it will be something else. If we trust ourselves to dance in absolute darkness, we can try to imagine a future where it is not so relevant to see what is being mobilized, where we can experience the potential of the dance itself. As Agamben remarks, 'human beings see shadows, they can experience darkness, they have the potential not to see' (1999: 181). Agamben plays with the motif of darkness because it evokes the idea of a potentiality that is outside the domain of actuality-as-light. When we are in the dark, external, phenomenal objects cannot take (actual) form; everything remains in the domain of potential.

I would not like to close this paper with a conclusion, but with some reasonable doubts about the dissenting possibilities that dance offers us; the potential of being in the blurred borders of the unintelligible, to inhabit contemporary paradoxes (that is, to produce unproductive dance works). Dismantling the future is speculative work about the problematization of facing a future that inevitably gives in to causality. However, with the potential of temporal transgression through dance, we can make the future a different space that responds to other logics. This space-site-place of otherness, where we could be queering time. Suddenly we are in that other future, because we refuse to walk that path that was imposed. Through a dance of otherness, to train denial and double denial, to refuse the reproductive burdens and responsibilities placed on us by neoliberalism – we are not that, we would not be that – .

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■ Figure 7. *What Cannot be Seen – This is no longer seen*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, 26 September 2018. Performer Roberto García. *Courtesy of La Casa Encendida*