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Reflecting About Failure

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Reflecting About “Lygia Clark and the Logics of Participation After ‘Failed’ Revolt”, by Kristen Carter
(Issue 7.1, Failure, 2017)

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General Editors – Issue 7.1, Failure

Our journal issue on the theme of *Failure* was published in 2017. Our goal was to bring together research that explored concepts of failure in its many manifestations across subject matter and disciplines. For this anniversary issue we have chosen Kristen Carter’s article *Lygia Clark and the Logics of Participation After ‘Failed’ Revolt*.

Carter looks at the works of performance art that Brazilian artist Lygia Clark was developing in Paris in the 1970s, and how they relate and respond to their cultural context. Civil unrest was fermenting at that time in the wake of the counter-capitalist protests of May 1968, a purportedly failed endeavour that did not achieve its desired ends. However, Clark’s performance pieces shed light on the desired communality of these acts of resistance, and in Carter’s analysis, the workings of community and group participation – both in the artwork and its political context – are revealed to be more complex and nuanced than simply a failed endeavour. In one of a series of experimental works, *Baba antropofágia*, a student is covered with thread “saturated with slobber” from the mouths of the rest of the

participants, leading us to consider, as Carter explains, “the intersections between embodiment, sensory knowledge, and intersubjective sociality”.

This work, which demonstrates our “collective entanglement” through a visceral, bodily process, interrogates ideas of community, participation, and collectivity, which have become all the more urgent in the few short years since *Failure*’s publication. We have seen dramatic upheavals in political and social life, and we are now reckoning with a set of conditions more extreme than we could have imagined. We are witnessing the seemingly limitless capacity of Donald Trump to astound us with the extremes of his behaviour, and with his lack of regard for evidence-based reasoning, the office of the presidency, and basic human kindness. The protracted and continuing fallout from the 2016 vote to leave the European Union has brought about a similar climate of chaos and uncertainty within our own political system. Finally, we are facing the worldwide spread of Covid-19, and the resulting lockdowns and fundamental disruptions to everyday life. The ever-present threat of contamination, of the transmission of diseased matter from one body to another, has been at once a collective experience, as seen in the “Clap for Carers” and the language of “pulling together”, and simultaneously one of division, as we are warned not to congregate and to maintain physical distance, waiting outside businesses in spaced boxes marked with tape.

More broadly, in recent years both the US and the UK have seen the rise of a politics founded on division, encouraging a fear and hatred of the Other, which, once it has taken hold as an ideological divide, is enforced by the use of political tools – border controls, deportation, detention centres – that endorse these divisions in law and public policy. These aspects of the current climate force us to consider the relationship between individual and community, self and other, and it is remarkable how the concerns of Carter’s essay have come to resonate with our participation in the world.

In April 2020 Trump suggested at a press conference that “medical doctors” look into disinfectant injected into the body, and exposure to UV light as possible cures for the Coronavirus. This was met with charitable interpretations from Trump’s unwavering supporters, and the fact that this has not been universally condemned as a failure to attain a basic scientific grasp of germ theory, and a testament to Trump’s dangerous naivety, belies the United States as a nation that is astonishingly divided. Indeed, we might well read our present moment as a combination of unprecedented political failings, resulting in the current climate of fear, uncertainty, and loss. In navigating this terrain, a rethinking of the terms of failure is more important than ever.

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Revisiting the Logics [and Spaces] of Participation After “Failed” Revolt (Issue 7.1, Failure, 2017)

Kristen Carter

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Perhaps it goes without saying that to revisit my article, *Lygia Clark and the Logics of Participation After ‘Failed’ Revolt* (2017), is to also revisit the idea of failure – the theme under which the article was originally published. In the few years since its publication I have come to understand failure as something akin to a provisional process. It involves an initial attempt, defeat in that attempt and, one hopes, some effort to critically reflect, revise, or re-group. When taken seriously and constructively, failure – no matter the scale – can often stimulate new opportunity, new possibility, and new processes of becoming and ways of being in the world.

In the following article – reprinted here from 2017 – I explore the generative impact of failure in relation to the participatory work and teachings of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. Specifically, I situate her collective propositions (developed with students between 1972 and 1976 while teaching at L’Université Paris-Sorbonne) within the perceived failures of May 1968 and their immediate aftermath – a time of widespread exhaustion among the left in France and increasing pessimism regarding the possibility for collective, social change. I argue that her collective propositions, which interrogated the embodied terms of personal and collective agency through a series of interactive exercises with students, help expose a moment when the manifest closing of revolutionary endeavours compelled the conditions

for new ways of thinking about collective engagement and personal empowerment. In particular for Clark, her propositions and teaching conferred a cathartic set of tools for students that held new meaning and force within a moment mired in attempts to organize and maintain distinctions “between what is possible and what isn’t” (Badiou, 2020, pp. 243-244). Thus, what at first might seem a retreat from the public, political stakes of the street was in fact something closer to what could be called a Deleuzian “line of flight”, a refusal to confront the state on its own terrain through new techniques of personal and collective liberation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987)¹.

Along these lines, and despite the broad socio-political onset of ambient disillusion in the reactionary wake of May, it was Clark’s desire to reconfigure meaningful participation with students that, to my mind, resonated so powerfully then and what still resonates today. Fifty years on and amid a wave of nationalist swings to the political right, the effects of the post-1968 moment and its revolutionary fallout are still felt in the west, namely as the left struggles to cohere against the weight of populist propaganda and fear². As questions are raised today regarding the viability of any collective project or party politics to intervene in the machinery of the state (whether at local, national, or international levels), the histories and collective possibilities in and around Clark’s propositions seem more urgent than ever. Together they ask what it might mean or look like to achieve some degree of independence within extant systems and without total freedom and

¹ Thank you to Tom McDonough and his review in which he made this insightful connection.

² See Jeremy Gilbert, *Common ground: democracy and collectivity in an age of individualism* (London: Pluto Press, 2014). In this, Gilbert argued that our current socio-political climate is marked by a democratic crisis: “a crisis in the capacity for collective decisions to be taken and upheld.” (p. viii). See also *Experimental politics: work, welfare, and creativity in the neoliberal age*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert, trans. Arianna Bove, Jeremy Gilbert, Andrew Goffey, Mark Hayward, Jason Read, Albert Toscano (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2017); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the future* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).

change. In so doing her work and teaching performed questions of “we” – what, for instance, constitutes a “we”? What are the different hopes, dangers, and potential tensions and pitfalls within a “we” and its various formations? And how do “we” come together in any real, effective, and affective manner without succumbing to the fallacy of a private “I”? More than anything, and through these kinds of questions, her work with students became a cathartic endeavour – a way to re-build, re-think, and re-group in the wake of perceived failure and collective exhaustion.

Now, three years later and with the opportunity to revisit this article and contentious period in the context of our own socio-political moment, it is the coterminous drive towards catharsis and the urge to rebuild collectivity that seems most potent (and prescient) in Clark’s collective propositions. And yet, in re-considering their histories, a burning issue still lingers below the writing’s surface and within the power of her teaching. Here I mean the very spaces that made re-thinking, re-grouping, and re-building possible, the very spaces where new models of participation and collectivity could emerge and develop, and the very spaces that made this kind of teaching and discussion viable. Here I am speaking to the university classroom, and the scope of university education and the emergence of critical pedagogy in the immediate wake of 1968 more broadly.

Since publishing on the theme of failure, my own interests and scholarship have put further pressure on the university classroom as a loaded, if not provisional site of interactive potentiality³. In Clark’s case, it constituted an at least somewhat protected space in which to engage new modes of being and new techniques of personal and collective liberation amid the pressures of the period. More broadly, however, in the early 1970s and after student revolt, education in general and the university classroom

³ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). See also Freire’s *Pedagogy of hope: reliving Pedagogy of the oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1994).

in particular offered fertile ground through which new forms of artistic, political, and theoretical radicalism could develop. For Clark and others, it constituted a possible gap between the force of two dialectical poles: the psychosis of revolution on the one end and the threat of assimilation on the other. Along these lines, radical educators like Paulo Freire laid bare powerful paradoxes, namely the idea that education could serve as both restorative purveyor of the status quo and as grounds for preserving and cultivating political consciousness. This is because education gave space to fail and fail again.

Now as we continue to consider institutional change through interstitial means, the necessity to build education as a provisional space remains crucial. Clark's propositions teach us this. I argue that when re-read in the spaces of learning – in addition to heeding a new logics of participation – their power rests not only in their asking for limited freedom in failure, but also in their asking of how we might lodge enough faith in the provisional to re-group and move forward together.

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Lygia Clark and the Logics of Participation After “Failed” Revolt

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Kristen Carter

In 1972, Brazilian artist Lygia Clark began teaching a course on “The Gesture of Communication” at the Centre Saint Charles of the Sorbonne, Paris. For three hours, twice a week, Clark experimented with some thirty students on a series of propositions entitled *Corpo coletivo* [Collective Body]. Concerned with expanding the notion of collective production and gestural exchange, these propositions explored the intersections between embodiment, sensory knowledge, and intersubjective sociality. For one enacted in 1973, Clark asked her students to insert reels of cotton thread in their mouths while kneeling in a circle around one student lying in the centre. Then, as if collectively extracting their own viscera, Clark asked her students to pull the strings – now saturated with slobber – from their mouths and place them over the recumbent student until he was fully covered. Next, the students began to reconnect with what they purged. Together they immersed their hands in the web of slobbered string, carefully untangling the one student, and at the same time each other. Soon they realised, like snarled insects caught in a spider’s web, every reach, turn, or pull induced a deeper, more precarious struggle against collective entanglement.

On the one hand, this gruesome event, entitled *Baba antropofágica* [Cannibalistic Slobber] appears communal and utopic in nature, engaging the students in a fusion, indeed ingestion, of boundaries between self and

other. Clark wrote of the experience as an exchange of interior knowledge, stating, “we arrived at what I call *Corpo coletivo*, which... is the exchange between people of their intimate psychology” (Brett, 1998, p.28). For Clark, this exchange was far from pleasant; the idea was that a person “vomits” life-experience when taking part. According to Clark, “[t]his ‘vomit’ is then going to be swallowed by the others, who will immediately vomit their inner ‘contents’ too” (Brett, 1998, p.28). This proposition thus relied on the exchange between symbolic, psychic, and visceral reaction.

At the same time, in being tied together and collectively implicated, the physical and psychic limits of each student were upheld, despite their redefinition. Indeed, it is not exactly the fusion of limits that constitute Clark’s collective body here, but rather the embodied experience of their entanglement under duress. In other words, the slobbered string mediated a body-to-body linking in which the precariousness of the students’ individual positions continuously unfolded into and at the same time against each other. Thus, it is with this lived, gestural exchange between self and intersubjective elaboration where *Baba antropofagia* seems to refuse both the possibility for individual autonomy, as well as the potential for a unified collectivity. That is, as the students were physically and conceptually tied together, local specificity was called up against shared experience, as if struggling to concede difference while at the same time attempting to mobilise collective agency. In fact, the students’ embodiment of this incessant struggle – the struggle between the individual and the totality of the group, generative agency and debilitating force, commonality and difference, or resistance and submission—is precisely what this work seems to propose, if not rely on and maintain. It does so not only by the restrictions imposed on the individual subject, but also by the dissolution and redefinition of these very limits that constitute a shared, mediated, and collective body.

Thus, it is through the prism of *Baba antropofágia*'s embodied struggle that we can begin to discern and re-think the dichotomy between subject and group, or individual and collective, a dichotomy which has been oversimplified particularly with regard to the complex histories from which this work emerged, and the histories that followed. More specifically, when located in the immediate wake of May 1968, I argue that Clark's collective propositions afford a unique entry-point into a moment wherein this dichotomy began to break down, thereby enabling new and more productive ways of thinking politically about subjectivity, agency, and the relationship between the self and the group, as well as collective action and individual autonomy. Certainly, by 1972 and in the midst of revolutionary foreclosure, these terms had become increasingly difficult to conceptualise and enact. As such, Clark's work and teachings at the Sorbonne remain vital to discussions concerning the efficacy of social, political, and artistic engagement both circa 1970 and today.

For four years, Clark continued to lead her course on gestural communication at the Sorbonne until returning home to her native Brazil in 1976. While teaching and working with students in Paris, she deepened the ideas first evidenced in *Baba antropofágia*, with other collective propositions including *Canibalismo* [Cannibalism] (1973), *Biological Arquitetures* [Biological Architectures] (1969), *Rede de elastico* [Elastic Net] (1973), and *Relaxation* (1974), all of which relied on gestural exchange and lived experience. The course itself was part of a new arts program launched by the University in 1969 to instantiate the socio-political and cultural urgencies raised during the May 1968 student demonstrations. According to Suely Rolnik (2010), the new curriculum emerged as an "alternative to the conservative model of training that characterised traditional Fine Arts schools, making it a space for freedom and artistic experimentation". As this opportunity enabled Clark to develop her propositions with the same student cohort, her work became increasingly focused on group activity, lived

experience, and dialogic exchange, leading many art historians to take up Clark's work in relation to a more recent interest in participatory art and collaborative art practices. Ana María León, for example, relates Jacques Rancière's paradigm of the emancipated spectator to Clark's elimination of the space between artist and audience in her propositions. For León (2011), the political agency realised within a work like *Baba antropofágia* hinged on the activation and binding of individuals together within a collective experience. This call to participate, she argues, mobilises a united (if not utopic) collective force, and therefore is endowed with revolutionary potential (León, 2011, pp. 50–52).

With this kind of relational and collective emphasis, Clark's work has been located within a specific history of theoretical and conceptual developments that have come to characterise 1960s art production. As Greenbergian formalism faltered under the weight of an increasingly volatile political climate by the mid-to-late 1960s, many artists sought to re-articulate the relationship between the art object, the artist, and audience. Happenings, for example, launched a fervent critique against a modernist aesthetic predicated on optical experience and formal self-reflexivity through the staging of events (or happenings) that invited viewers to participate and be involved in the process of artistic production. This collaborative, participatory impulse, or what Grant Kester has described as an interactive, dialogical praxis, helped shift the "locus of aesthetic meaning from the moment of creative plenitude in the solitary act of making (or the viewer's imaginative reconstruction of this act) to a social and discursive realm of shared experience, dialogue and physical movement" (Kester, 2004, p. 54). For Kester, such dialogical projects, which unfold through an open and collaborative process of "performative interaction", derive from a movement away from object-based practices informed by conceptual art, as well as an interest in making a "given work dependent on direct physical or perceptual interaction with the viewer" (2004, pp. 13–14). This dialogical thrust, he

contends, draws from such concepts as empowerment and participatory democracy that found radical expression in the 1960s, and therefore ultimately links together artistic practice with new forms of “intersubjective experience and social or political activism” (Kester, 2004, p. 131; p. 9). When set within these histories and concerns, the discourse dominating Clark’s work tends to concentrate on the dissolution of authorship for the sake of an emancipatory, collective, and participatory experience. In so doing, her work is often located within the interpretative framework of proto-social practice as it emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the past decade, numerous studies have meditated on the political efficacy of a socially-engaged, interactive art practice, tracing its histories in relation to what Claire Bishop has called a “perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility today” (2006, p. 12). Bishop, for example, who maintains that Clark is an important precursor for contemporary artists working at the interface between art and participation, contends participatory art’s recent political implications hinge on its ability to restore a “social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning”, ameliorating the “alienating and isolating effects of capitalism” (Bishop, 2006, p. 12). Indeed, for Kester, at stake in an interactive model of art is how it might facilitate reciprocal exchange between subjects, establishing a “more compassionate” and coherent relationship between self and other (2004, p. 150). That is, through a process of dialogue and artistic collaboration, the relations between artist, viewer, and the work of art dissolve, refuting the “authority of a single artist”, and instead creating what he calls a “politically coherent community” (Kester, 2004, p. 161).

With León, Bishop, and Kester, whether implicitly or explicitly, the interactive capacities afforded by Clark’s relational projects have been rooted in a goal of collective conviviality while being used to justify art by and relate

it with participation more broadly⁴. Bishop, for example, contends a more recent turn to participatory art practices can be contextualised by earlier historical movements, all of which are synonymous with political upheaval and social change: “[t]he historic avant-garde in Europe circa 1917, the so-called neo-avant-garde leading to 1968”, and the fall of communism in 1989 (Bishop, 2012, p. 3). These three movements, she argues, form a “narrative of the triumph, the heroic last stand, and collapse of a collectivist vision of society” (Bishop, 2012, p. 3). Further, these phases have been accompanied by a utopian re-thinking of “art’s relationship to the social and of its political potential” (Bishop, 2012, p. 3). The implications extrapolated within these lines of thinking are important. However, they do not account for the complexity and radical potential inherent in the kind of collective body established in *Baba antropofágia*, and the other propositions conducted while Clark was teaching at the Sorbonne in Paris after 1968. In other words, the conceptual and political frameworks that have been developed, regarding participatory art practices alongside the trajectory of Clark’s work, tend to rely on a certain history and promise: the promise of radical action, emancipation, and communitarian politics. More specifically, these promises hinge on the historical frameworks of participatory democracy and collectivism that were so central to the culmination of events leading up to 1968, not just in Paris, but also in the United States and Brazil. Yet, it seems to me that, when we look more closely at the artistic and political implications of her work after 1968 – developed roughly between 1972 and 1976 in Paris – Clark’s propositions do not so much establish direct action and collectivity, but rather interrogate what these ideas could mean at a time when the very terms of participation and collectivity were beginning to break

⁴ For an excellent discussion regarding the relationship between different forms of community, politics and aesthetics see Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor, and Seth McCormick (eds) 2009, ‘Introduction: Communities of Sense’, *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Duke University Press.

down. In fact, her propositions and the kinds of collective bodies they established seem to rely equally on social union and dissolution. In this way, they afford a way to re-think what participation and collectivity could look like after 1968; that is, at the very moment when the promise of these terms ostensibly failed.

My primary focus on Clark's work concerns how the elaboration of collectivity in her *Corpo coletivo* series can be brought to bear directly on a contentious and uncertain moment wherein collective action was not only called into question, but also seemingly made impossible and maintained as such. Specifically, the moment under consideration comprises the years immediately following the events of May 1968 in France. From a historic vantage point, these years call up a confusing and messy conjuncture of socio-political and ideological shifts, especially as the hope and radical impetus of the student and worker protests were brought to a close. Consider, for example, that in Paris, just one month after France had witnessed its greatest strike in recent history, Charles de Gaulle announced new elections. With the promise to restore order, the president came out on top with more public support than ever before: sweeping majorities re-elected de Gaulle under the pledge to 'moralise, assuage, and temper' student and worker dissent. In the days, months, and even years following 1968, the optimism of May began to fade while an air of resignation settled in. As de Gaulle's conservative administration gained power and public support, and as calls for law and order overcame the waning promises of collective refusal, the terms of political commitment, individual agency, and collective potentiality had become increasingly difficult to conceptualise and enact.

How, then, are we to consider collectivity and participation after what seemed to be a failed revolt? This question signals the problems, paradoxes, and complexity of this moment – a moment ripe for analysis, yet difficult to pin down. The term "failure" is contentious and vehemently debated in

relation to the legacies and impact of 1968⁵. To be sure, it is not my intention to evaluate the perceived successes and failures of 1968. Rather, my concerns hinge on how the political viability of collectivity was understood and contested in the days, months, and years afterwards. Alain Badiou's ideas and writings regarding Restoration provide a useful framework for approaching the post-68 period. By adopting the term Restoration I mean to invoke a counter-revolutionary moment that began in the 1970s and which, according to Badiou, can be characterised by a broad, systematic, and global shift into a reactionary period wherein the possibilities of radical, collective emancipation are perpetually denied and neutralised, ultimately made impossible and maintained as such. It was – or still is – a debilitating reaction to the worldwide socio-political turmoil of the late 1960s, which according to Badiou came close to constituting what he calls an event, or what can be explained as a total rupture of existing systems and structures of thought. Importantly here, Badiou locates the terms of Restoration and the foreclosure of collective potentiality not in the failures and scope of '68 exactly, but rather within the polemics of defeat and the cynicism, denial, and betrayal that followed (Badiou, 2007, p. 26; 2008, pp. 32–34). Kristin Ross (2002), in her formative account of May 1968 and all of its afterlives, calls attention to these kinds of foreclosures both in the immediate post-1968 period, as well as in the vast histories that followed. More specifically, she investigates how the politics enacted through collective refusal not only made '68 possible, but also were also strategically denied in its wake. For example, as Ross points out, the government's promised return-to-order meant increased censorship and surveillance, deportation of politically 'nonneutral' foreigners, and the addition of over 42,000 police to the streets, factories, and campuses by 1974 (Ross, 2002, p. 62). The swift crackdown and return to order that Paris underwent in the months and years following May 1968 had profound, yet

⁵ For a nuanced discussion of the debates and legacies of 1968 see entire issue: 2008, *New Formations*, no. 65.

crippling, effects. As the politics of collectivity – enacted through a lived, relational experience – were denied, cynicism, disillusionment, and rage settled in, leaving many of those who participated in the uprisings feeling isolated, defeated, and politically immobile.

What, then, were the implications of this moment and shift in relation to an understanding of the political viability of art at this time? That is, in a moment marked by restorative foreclosures and the perceived failure of a revolutionary project, how was collective agency and revolutionary fervour re-defined? And, how did this re-definition constitute alternative models of participation and collectivity? Mapping these questions and this terrain in relation to Clark's work reveals the politics embedded in the landscape around these alternative models and aesthetic preoccupations, while enabling a re-consideration of participation and collectivity more broadly.

In 1968, Clark moved from Brazil to Paris following the exhibition of her installation *A casa é o corpo* [The House is the Body] (1968) at the 1968 Venice Biennale. From 1968 to 1976, she was living in Paris in a state of self-imposed exile from Brazil during its years of state-sanctioned terrorism – the implications of which would continue to inform her work while she lived and worked in Paris⁶. However, what cannot be overlooked

⁶ While Clark focuses artistic scope on collective engagements while in Paris, her belief in the importance of experience in service of the art object began while in Brazil working with artists such as Lygia Pape, Helio Oiticica and Ferreira Gullar. Together they explored artistic strategies and theories concerned with locating identity and agency through participatory art practices that subverted the despotic values enforced by Brazil's repressive military dictatorship, as well as the authoritative rigidity of geometric abstraction—a popular style widely promoted by the Brazilian government at the time. In doing so, these artists adopted and utilised Oswald de Andrade's theories on cultural cannibalism, or *Canibalismo* (de Andrade, 1928). Lygia Clark's work and teachings at the Sorbonne were in many ways informed by the histories of *Canibalismo*, which called upon a collective Brazilian identity in the wake of the country's Portuguese occupation. Clark viewed the act of swallowing or ingesting as a means to absorb power, culture, and the idea of 'other', making it one's own. The idea is that in this process of adopting or taking ownership an individual may grant herself agency and control. The implications of this are evident in *Baba antropofágica* wherein Clark instructed her students to ingest and "vomit" (bave) thread as a metaphor for the awareness of self in relation to others. The implications here cannot be fully teased out within the discursive confines of this essay, but it provides grounds for an extended analysis regarding the kinds of collectivity established in her work and how these modalities were conceptualised in relation to strategies of political resistance, especially in moments of political crisis.

about her time in Paris is that she moved there in October of 1968, just after the events of May. Thus, the crisis of May, and the restorative situation following, remains crucial for a critical exploration of her work and the way her collective propositions resonated in Paris with her students. Upon invitation in 1972, Clark taught at the Sorbonne until 1976. In weekly workshops, Clark proposed collective experiences that highlighted the lived relationships between each member of the group. With *Baba antropofagia*, along with other propositions, and including *Rede de elastico* [Elastic Net] (1973), these lived and relational experiences called up the constitutive tensions between self and other, or the self and the group. In the latter proposition, Clark asked her students to create a large net made from elastic ropes. Then the students tied themselves together, wrapping the net around each other. In this sharing of lived experience, the students, who were at once affected and affecting, became aware of their individual bodies as they related to the totality of the group. According to Clark, this embodied knowledge not only “prepares one for life”, but also bestows a “communal commitment to an unending process of always experimental, always renewable and always intersubjective” discovery of one’s self (Lepecki, 2014, pp. 280–281). At stake in these embodied experiences was a lived and critical inquiry into subject formation and collectivity – or rather, the collective production of subjectivity.

When considering the implications of this focus on lived experience and subjectivity, and how it might have resonated at this time, it is important to remember that Clark developed this series while working with students as part of her course on the gesture of communication for an entire academic year, even carrying some of this work on to the next year with the same students. This kind of opportunity allowed for a return to the same problems, materials, and students. And as Andre Lepecki has suggested, this passage of time and “vital return” is what helps turn the collective body (*el Corpo coletivo*) into a collective subjectivity – or rather, a “mode of existence for

living life” (2014, pp. 285–286). For students and artists who were grappling with the immediate aftermath of 1968 – living and working in a moment wherein the fallacy of individual and collective agency became more broadly recognised – the relationship between the self and the idea of collective invention, especially as a “mode of existence”, became a crucial yet contested issue. In other words, Clark’s interest in the politics of lived experience dovetailed with a wider preoccupation with the subject and the micro-politics of the everyday. In the late 1960s, new forms of political and theoretical radicalism became increasingly interested with the politicisation of the personal. Fuelled by a growing awareness of how power operates on and through individuals – whether through language, ideology, or discourse – the embodied and embedded nature of the subject became an urgent and central issue, especially for students, artists, and activists struggling to bring about change both to and through institutions within a moment of restorative foreclosure. Indeed, what was “brought to trial” in the post-68 period was, as Kester points out, the “individual’s relationship to the collective and the relative efficacy of organised forms of political action” (2011, p. 13), especially as political action was met increasingly with violent retaliation, or risked bureaucratisation and recuperation by the forces the protestors sought to oppose. As Badiou (2007), Peter Starr (1995), Ross (2002), and other theorists and historians have argued, in the years after May 1968 these modes of retaliation and recuperation established a political impasse that initiated processes of denial and retreat, reabsorption into the political system, or otherwise ignited violent guerrilla action that went underground. At the same time, however, it also helped mobilise a series of “so-called micro-political projects” (Starr, 1995, p. 7) wherein political concerns shifted from the ‘arena of state power’ and institutional upheaval to that of the everyday; that is, from the “adjudication among political subjects to the constitution of subjectivity” (Bourg, 2007, p. 109).

Peter Starr, in his seminal book, *The Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68* (1995) locates this shift within the emergence of post- structural theory that, as he argues, in the wake of failed revolt, relied on discursive modes of “subtle” or “discrete” subversion, often through art, theory, or writing. Conversely, Julian Bourg identifies this theoretical shift as a turn towards ethics in his book *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (2007). As he explains, in the early 1970s, after the “energies of 1968 were somewhat diffused but still potent”, anti-psychiatry and the philosophy of desire became another way “to redefine revolutionary fervour and locate alternative languages and sites for its expression” (Bourg, 2007, p.117). While the nuanced implications of these turns are vast and beyond this essay’s discursive scope, at stake in this shift towards ethics, or towards a theory of the subject in the writings of Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser and Irigaray was, as Rosi Braidotti put it, a “critique of the humanistic implications of political conservatism” and authoritative control (Braidotti, 2002, p. 165). Thus, after May 1968 political radicalism tended to focus less on collective action and institutional upheaval and more on “the need to unveil power relations where they are most effective and invisible: in the specific locations of one’s own intellectual and social practice” (Braidotti, 2008, p. 25)⁷.

⁷ See also Rosi Braidotti 2008, “The Politics of Radical Immanence: May 1968 as an Event”, *New Formations*, no. 65. In this essay Braidotti explains these new forms of philosophical radicalism developing in France in the 1960s were a “vocal critique to the dogmatic structure of communist and of psychoanalytic thought and practice” (p. 23). She continues: “[t]he crux of the problem was the theory of the subject which is implicit in these theories: under the cover of the unconscious, or the bulk of historical materialism, the subject of critical European theory preserved a unitary, hegemonic and royal place as the motor of human history. This is the implicit humanism that triggered the criticism of thinkers like Foucault, Irigaray and Deleuze. The rejection of humanistic assumptions therefore took the form of unhinging the subject, freeing it respectively from the dictatorship of a libido dominated by oedipal jealousy, and from the linearity of a historical telos which had married reason to the revolution, both of them vowing violence” (p. 23).

Working directly within this theoretical and political milieu, it was this understanding of the subject as something active and situated, constituted by interaction that Clark found especially interesting⁸. Through lived experience and shared tension, her propositions aimed to exploit the various social processes by which the subject is mutually constituted. Indeed, mobilised by touch and shared, sensory experience, the crux of the issue for Clark and her students was highlighting the lived and constitutive relationship between the self and the group. Both *Baba antropofágia* and *Rede de elastico* implied the boundaries defining individuals are penetrable and not fixed, ultimately vulnerable and discursively, politically, and physically situated. That is, these propositions called up a lived and contingent process of mutual constitution wherein the fallacy of individuality is re-worked through an intersubjective—or what can be called a transindividual model of subjectivity and shared experience. This, according to theorist Jason Read, “entails not just a rethinking of the antinomy of the individual and the collective, but a new ontology and logic of thinking about the subject” (Read, 2011, p. 119). Within the framework of transindividuality, the subject is understood as a field of relations wherein the individual and society are in a mutual and constant relationship – both affecting the other. Identities, then, are embodied and “processual, rather than fixed, because they are formed and re-formed through our participation in larger transindividual wholes” (Gatens, 1999, p. 127). As Read suggests,

⁸ As the post-1968 moment fuelled questions concerning subjectivity, repression, and liberation, psychoanalysis and its alternatives became experimental, discursive spaces in which to explore, contest and articulate these very issues. Suely Rolnik, who fled to Paris in 1970 from Brazil, notes the import of psychoanalysis at this time in Paris, as well as her experience of meeting Clark. Rolnik describes: “[i]n Lygia, I discovered an active quest for the politics of the sensible and thus of desire and subjectivity, deploying a sort of entirely singular zone that was cut through at once by the political, the aesthetic and the clinical. ... [Clark] thought that [this interest in the subject] might offer a possibility for understanding her own work and developing it theoretically” (Larsen and Rolnik, 2007). Further, in letters to friends and colleagues Clark elaborates on her interests in Gilles Deleuze and his writings on subjectivity in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings on phenomenology (Lygia Clark, 1998).

this thinking requires going beyond the opposition of the individual and society, of moving beyond these starting points to grasp the “productive nexus from which both individualities and collectivities emerge” (Read, 2011, p. 116). Thus, when set within this transindividual framework, the force of Clark’s propositions allows for new and more nuanced forms of participation and collective organisation to emerge.

In this way, my understanding of collectivity, and how it might be constituted through a lived tension between self and other, departs from the more recent and aforementioned art historical analyses wherein interaction and collectivity are associated with collectivism, or a model of community-based art where solidarity hinges on the coherence of individual participants⁹. Rather, my understanding of collectivity in relation to Clark’s propositions is closer to what the theorist Gilles Deleuze meant when he responded to a question posed by Antonio Negri. Concerned with the limits and conditions of collectivity in the immediate aftermath of 1968 Negri asked: “[h]ow can we conceive a community that has real force but no base, that isn’t a totality?”. In response, Deleuze wrote:

The word ‘communication’ is too weak to express what happens in the group. There are other specific aspects for this group to be *Corpo coletivo*, there is the creating of an identity like a whole in which everyone participates, touches each other, ‘hurts’ each other in the confrontation between two fantasies. Another characteristic of this *Corpo coletivo* is that it cannot take place just once, like in a happening. The meaning given to it is that there is a socialising in time and a joint elaboration in which each individual changes, expressing himself, connecting affectively or not to each element in the group, creating an exchange of impressions which goes beyond the propositions and affects the life of each member (1998, p. 306).

⁹ For a nuanced discussion regarding the reconfiguration of collectivity, collectivism, and community after 1968 see: Jeremy Gilbert 2014, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, Pluto Press, London. See also, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello 2005, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso Press, New York.

This passage is compelling not only because it speaks to and responds so clearly to a broader historical moment in which the very terms of collectivity, participation, and political commitment were being called into question, but also because of the way such issues and questions continue to resonate with our historical present. Take, for example, Clark’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2014, which exhibited work spanning the entirety of her artistic career. In one press photograph published by the *New York Times*, two official museum “facilitators” are seen demonstrating one of Clark’s sensorial propositions to three unengaged visitors who stand at a marked and passive distance. Behind them various suits and nets that were used in other seminar propositions hang limply and lifeless on the wall behind them. This photograph – which depicts Clark’s sensorial propositions unhinged from any locational specificity and stripped of all participatory and experiential dimensions – serves as an exemplar of sorts. Revealing the extent to which the social and political potential imbued in this kind of work demands critical resuscitation; not least because it affords us the opportunity to reconsider and establish a politics of participation and collective organisation within a moment of restorative foreclosure, but also because it asks how that foreclosure can be called into question today.

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