

## **Nomadic Making; enacting difference through collaborative performance practice**

### **Abstract**

This article considers how scored, collaborative performance practice enacts Braidotti's Nomadic subject and disrupts advanced capitalism's suture of object and subject formation (Lepecki) thereby offering a means for posthumans to 'become imperceptible' (Braidotti after Deleuze). Collaborative performance practice, I argue offers a lived experience of the non-unitary subject and political potential of pure difference. I suggest also that 'spectator studies' (Melrose) reconsiders its focus on object over process by arguing that choreographic knowledge resides not in the event or the performance score but the processes of assemblage and in-between relations of people and practices (Manning).

### **Keywords**

Subjectivity, Posthuman, Dance, Collaboration, Improvisation, Senses, Micro-politics, Braidotti, Lepecki, Manning.

### **Introduction**

This essay offers a practitioner perspective on a scored, collaborative performance practice *flockOmanina* to interrogate how choreographic practices can be argued to enact Braidotti's Nomadic subject and disrupt advanced capitalism's suture of object and subject formation as argued by Lepecki.

In taking this approach I explore the register of choreographic knowledge locatable in the event or performance scores for such work, once the provocation of 'Nomadic Making' is accepted. Specifically, I'm interested in how these insights might offer a line towards alternative critical frames of analysis that address both the choreographic process and perceived object or artefact of the work with equal dexterity and clarity.

In making this observation I argue that choreographic knowledge resides not in the event or the performance score but the processes of assemblage and in-between relations of people and practices (Manning) and follow Melrose in her suggestion that

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

‘spectator studies’ reconsiders its habitual focus on the art object over choreographic process.

### **A Case for Nomadic Making**

In trying on this idea of ‘Nomadic Making’ as a way to characterise the creative processes within this project, I also seek to illuminate the political significance of choreographic processes such as this which embrace multiple ‘authors’ across multiple projects, times and place by arguing that they offer a lived experience of the non-unitary subject for those that encounter the practice. However, before moving on to explore the value of ‘Nomadic Making’ as a way to articulate projects such as *flockOmania*, it is probably worth declaring my relationship to the provocation. I have an ongoing interest in the political potential of contemporary dance practice to disrupt or recast understandings of dialectical difference through performance stemming from my Doctoral research in the early 2000s<sup>i</sup>. Within this is a questioning of the type and role of critical frameworks applied to performance, particularly those operating from a postmodern perspective. Her work, along with that of UK scholar Susan Melrose, has been a companion in my thinking from and through practice over the last 10-15 years. Specifically, I have been interested in dance practice that moves beyond a play of identity politics at the level of representation. For this reason, Braidotti’s positing of the material body and embodiment as key to subjectivity alongside philosophical understandings resonates with the particular movement practices I work with.

Braidotti’s Nomadic project is, as she herself notes, broad in references and long standing, having been developed over a 20-year period and amidst extensive consideration of posthumanism. This essay therefore, is not an attempt at a comprehensive critical investigation of this idea. Rather it offers a starting point of

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

possible routes or wanderings for dance-makers seeking to articulate the social and political significance of their work. Following Melrose, the discussion argues scored, collaborative performance practice such as *flockOmania*, illustrate how choreographic knowledge resides not in the event or the performance score, but within the processes of assemblage and the in-between relations of people and practices (Manning).

In developing the idea of the Nomadic, US scholar Erin Braidotti draws on Deleuze and Guattari's seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus*. Specifically, she draws on the way they conceive of the individuals' relationship to the land they inhabit via the notion of the 'Sedentary' and 'Nomadic'.

The Sedentary relationship to land is conceived as one marked by ownership of specific territories marked by crossings and borders. Movement across these different territories is characterised by a need to negotiate and adhere to the demarcations of the walls, check points, pathways and private property rules. In contrast, to this, a Nomadic relationship to land offers the notion of the desert, borderless and without demarcated single land ownership, its geography defined by the needs of the journey – water holes, meeting places, encampments, the stopping places necessitated by the journey. In this conceptualisation the Sedentary model illuminates a tendency for people to 'belong' and stay static or attached to a particular place or space. In this is seen to reside the potential to 'not belong' and become migrant or mobile as an exception to this, thereby becoming 'othered' 'in the process. In contrast to this, the Nomadic approach understands people as distributed across the land they inhabit, with people moving through the land, rather than there being an attachment of land to the individual. Underlying this is a positioning of movement as the defining characteristics of the relationship to land rather than the exception. As such, relationship to place is always intermediate and all are considered Nomadic whether

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

in transit or not. This privileging of movement and embodied (meaning here located in history and culture) extends to concepts of subjectivity upheld by Braidotti following Deleuze and in doing so offers a provocation around notions of difference.

Developing Braidotti's idea of the Nomadic subject in response to the Deleuzian theory of becoming, she stated that the 'Nomadic subject is shifting, partial, complex and multiple...You can never be a nomad, you can only go on trying to become Nomadic' (Braidotti 2002: 86). In part, her statement emphasises that the Deleuzian subject, in its non-unitary form is no longer created with an understanding of 'sameness' against 'difference'. And recognises that Deleuzian philosophy, rather than seeking to reverse the hierarchal relationship between dominant and subordinate, 'Molar/Molecular' rather proposes a flattening out of the terrain to move beyond a dialectical approach to being. This approach negates the rational, conscious, unified-self upheld by the binary structure of same and other influenced by platonic notions of the real or origin. Deleuzian difference is thus for Braidotti 'the affirmation of difference in terms of a multiplicity of possible differences; difference as the positivity of difference' (Braidotti 2002: 71) whereby situatedness of subjectivity is not erased but rather illuminated, and rendered a reflexive component of the becoming process.

With this in mind I am interested in how the Nomadic principle might illuminate current practices in collaborative, cross-discipline, scored choreographic practice in which making process move between the digital and live, and are untethered across time, space and discipline. Also, how might the Nomadic frame recognise the messy, un-chartable aspects of making that takes place in the in-between of bodies, the

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

studio, conversation and the event or choreographic score.

Braidotti proposes, following Spinoza and Deleuze, that subject formations are always relational or assemblages and this must be recognised in any political desire to mobilise change and unveil the marginal. Doing so acknowledges the power of the ethical good as formulated by Spinoza whereby affirmative action and potentiality are enabled. 'Politics is the absolute enactment of productive assemblages, is the enactment of alliances, relational modes, that actually empower us to act' (Braidotti 2014). As scholar Stefan Herbrechter notes

Braidotti's is an eminently political project – it is an affirmative politics, which according to her, 'entails the creation of sustainable alternatives geared to the construction of social horizons of hope, while at the same time doing critical theory, which implies resistance to the present (Herbrechter 2013: 6).

Accepting this stance, we begin to see how choreographic knowledge might be understood as the drive from the virtual to the real through the ethical good of 'becoming imperceptible' in a Deleuzian sense (Braidotti 2014).

From this materialist, posthuman perspective Braidotti's formulation of subjectivity in advance capitalism begins to illuminate further Lepecki's observations about the rise of object related performance and the necessity it fulfils for those seeking to disrupt the entwinement of consumer objects and the allure of stable identity making. As he notes within such work 'The bind between object-hood and subjectivity is shaken for a moment' (Lepecki 2012: 90). Alongside this, the work of Manning reminds us of the relationship between micro-perceptions and micro-politics within the posthuman body, whereby the 'incipient' or 'pre-acceleration' of movement, the moment before

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

movement finds form in the world but arises as potential (Manning, 2009) is understood as the realm in which pure difference might exist. Such an approach extends the view that subjectivity arises from sensation (touch) and movement, from being in the world.

### **Introduction to an Instance of Practice: *flockOmania 1***

*flockOmania* is an ongoing collaborative project between jewellery-maker Zoe Robertson, dance-artists Natalie Garrett Brown and Amy Voris and photographer Christian Kipp. The project consists of wearable sculptural objects which have been generated by Robertson in response to the relationship with our improvisational dance practice. Our collaborative process includes in-person and digital modes of collaboration and is underpinned by a shared interest in process-orientated making practices that oscillate around encounters between the material performance body and the materials of arts practice; object, light, film, sound and site.

Our collaboration as 9 artists began in an earlier Lanchester Gallery project entitled *L219*<sup>ii</sup> (2013), itself an evolving collaboration across time and multiple art forms. In this earlier project, the permission to move the ‘art’ objects or jewellery pieces from the pedestal of gallery plinth to pavement was established. In *L219* we first explored moving with the jewellery pieces as art objects, also offering audience members the opportunity to move and touch the objects. Notions of making from the kinaesthetic and experiential were starting points for our collaboration, first through practice and latterly through conversation and shared writing establishing our ‘Nomadic’ tendencies within the creative process.

*FlockOmania 1*<sup>iii</sup> consisted of an ‘art’ exhibition which ran for a month across January

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

and February 2015 at the Lanchester Gallery, a gallery owned and curated by the School of Art & Design at Coventry University in the UK, with a stated agenda at the time of commissioning to support artistic research. The exhibition closed with a collaborative improvised performance event bringing together sound, light, photography and film-artists. In doing so, we<sup>iv</sup> inverted the usual visual art exhibition private view opening night model choosing instead to create a closing event throughout the duration of the 4-week exhibition. In describing the solo exhibition for *flockOmania 1* Robertson states

The exhibition has been created in response to a collaborative relationship with dance artists Garrett Brown and Voris. Their background in contemporary dance, movement improvisation and site-based performance has provided the catalyst for this body of work. (2015 Publicity leaflet)

The making process for the objects foreground the relational properties of the objects and dancing body. For Robertson the resulting objects are jewellery ‘theatrically-sized to emphasise and explore themes relating to the scale and movement of the body’ (2015: Publicity leaflet). Their status as worn, moved and inhabited jewellery became an axis of the work, forming part of the event score. The objects moved location throughout the day during the exhibition weeks and as part of the performance event including momentary relocations outside the gallery space. We, the collaborators, worked with a notion of the exhibition opening times as a continued space for making and investigation, ‘a laboratory’ for us to continue our experimenting. Part of the making process included moving with and amongst the exhibition visitors, sometimes encouraging their interaction with the objects, sometimes removing ourselves from the equation to allow participants the permission to engage in their own experiments.

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

The objects created by Robertson were hand-crafted using traditional fabrication techniques in combination with industrial processes and new technology in order to make large-scale pieces designed to be danced by the whole body or multiple bodies . The objects question conventions of material, scale, craft and mode of production common to jewellery making. As dance-makers, we are interested in how collaborating with a jewellery-maker challenges and consolidates our choreographic process as dance-makers concerned with iterative improvisational practice, and likewise how our practice may inform the conception and crafting of Robertson's objects.

Prior to the *flockOmania* project, Robertson's work was created on a traditional jewellery bench. Through this project, Robertson noted how the shift in workshop environment (to one of a much larger scale) in turn influenced the scale of the jewellery that she now makes. For example, the capacity to lay materials out across a larger space has enabled the production of work at a much more exaggerated scale in relation to the whole body. Through our collaboration, Robertson recognises she has become much more aware of her embodied and intuitive experience as a maker. Robertson describes how she 'feels her way through the making process, sometimes working with eyes closed, sensing the undulations of the three-dimensional form through her finger tips'. Rather than making from a 'purely visual' perspective, the tactility and sensuality of the objects assumes primary importance. This concern with the tactility and sensuality of the objects manifests through the objects' large scale, through the felt-experience of their mass and weight on the body and through attention to their potential 'dual wearability' — where one object can be worn by two people.



As dance-makers, we are equally concerned with the sensorial. Our work is an ongoing dialogue between the materiality of the body and the materiality of the sculptural objects. Our work is informed by somatic practices, a field of practice within dance (and beyond) that is concerned with body-mind integration while moving. In particular we draw on the practices of Experiential Anatomy and Authentic Movement to ‘flesh out’ the material presence of the body and to open to the presence of kinaesthetic imagination – which of course includes our own set of associations, socio-cultural and dance-historical reference points. Our interest is in meeting the objects through the sensing moving body with an awareness of the surrounding environment.

Through direct engagement with the sensations of the moving body we physically explore the scale, weight, texture and potential momentum of the objects. In each practice, we seek to discern *moving imagery* that arises from the rich interplay between sensing in the present moment and returning to known constellations of material. As dance-artists, the enquiry into image making is honed through the relationship between body, space and collaborators offered by the wearable objects. Integral to this enquiry into image, is the exploration of improvisation strategies that serve to maintain a sensorial response to objects, space, light and sound within an open laboratory or event context. Here the skill of moving between different registers of bodily attention, orientating via the body systems (nervous, skeletal, organ and so forth) as conceptualised by Experimental Anatomy, and the tradition of witnessing and deep listening as practiced within the tradition of Authentic Movement, sit in tandem with compositional focussed improvisational crafting of time, space and

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

dynamics. In this the objects, like the improvised dance are understood to be in a continual process of creation. Our practice thus includes the moment-to-moment engagement with emergent movement material as well as the long-term engagement with movement forms that are remembered and returned to. True to the changeable status and multi-layered nature of the moving body, we understand our choreographic process as a 'live' and ongoing process of adjustment that takes place incrementally over time. The act of composing lies in the dialogic interplay between what is known and what is unknown, with each practice being the temporary instantiation of this dialogic process. In preparation for a performance event, the scores settle into an agreed order and time-frame, with the understanding that this will reform for future instances, and that small perhaps subtle changes continue into the moment of the event. Integral to our enquiry as improvisers is the exploration of improvisation strategies that serve to support a sensorial and embodied response not just to objects, but also to the surrounding environment.

Much like other projects we are involved with, our approach to movement is underpinned by an engagement with site-responsive improvisational practice, which itself draws on several traditions such as those of US movement artist Anna Halprin. Following Halprin's RSVP cycles, reflective practice is embedded into our approach to working site-responsively and to collaborating. This offers us a means to make conscious our experiential knowing of the work as it emerges. As part of this reflective process, we often draw on the photographic images of our collaborator Christian Kipp. These images resonate with our danced experience of the objects, while also offering us another perspective on how the objects and the body read in space. This reflective process produces a collection of written materials, including

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

scores which are being continuously revisited as they emerge towards an event. Such scores serve as initiators of the practice -- guiding our interactions with the objects, site and audience – and are constructed with a commitment to long-term practice. These materials appear in the scored-collaborative performance event alongside the creative sketches of Robertson, projected and displayed in the gallery environment.

In Robertson's work we detect the traces of construction within the objects and as part of their arrangement in space. Films and images of the design and production process, including our wearing and moving with prototypes, appear on the *flockOmania* website and also form part of the exhibition in the form of projected films, design drawings and writings. This transparency of process is echoed in our 'laboratory' of making during the exhibition mentioned earlier, and the approach to creating the improvisational structures or movement 'scores' of the dance for the closing event. In this particular instance, the scores experiment with the shifting meanings and associations accumulated by the objects across time, and in dialogue with many bodies including invigilators, students, exhibition visitors and collaborating artists. In the context of this durational approach to developing the work, the closing event extends the ongoing experiment in public view. In this closing event Robertson also inhabits the gallery, as participant-performer in the event of objects moved, collected and rearranged. In this moving and rearranging, the wearable, sculptural objects collectively combine to construct a world of their own, offering unexpected and unknown connections with the gallery environment and those that visit. The wearable, sculptural objects in *flockOmania* can be seen to refuse stable meanings, moving between images and associations as they are constructed, exhibited and danced by us and audience members. In doing so they echo Manning's

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

notion of Nomadic subjecthood understood as shifting, partial, complex and multiple. The objects for *flockOmania* sit outside the everyday register of utilitarian objects. As oversized jewellery they negate the expected use of jewellery pieces appropriated for adornment and markers of identity. This serves to disrupt the normative systems of meaning attributed to objects historically worn on the body as jewellery or conversely displayed on the plinths and cabinets of art galleries. The performative world created a sensorial experience for audience and artists alike, destabilising the visual associations with objects at the level of representation through a deliberate invoking of the tactile and kinaesthetic senses, 'their [the object's] qualities are activated in action and interaction through the physical senses rather than just the visual' (Journeaux and Whatley 2015: 113).

*flockOmania* stands also in conversation with the history of dance in the museum (Franko and Lepecki 2014) and the rarified status of the 'art object' at the level of artistic exchanges and project framing. As noted by Lepecki (2012) the use of objects in performance, while not new, has seen a resurgence within the last 5-10 years. Mirrored by the rise of the object in philosophy<sup>v</sup>, this reoccupation he argues is best understood in relationship to the role of objects within advanced capitalism. Sitting within the tradition of 'experimental performance' discussed by Lepecki the same observations can be made about the *flockOmania* project. There is for example an interest in the referential play across object, body, sound, film and light as invited by the theatrical frame. In dialogue with the ideas outlined by Lepecki (2012: 76), Journeaux and Whatley (2015) observe that in *flockOmania 1*:

The congenial play between artists and audience created a continually changing and immersive environment where suspended objects became

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

costumes, toys, theatrical props, occasional prosthetics, or ‘surrogate performers’ (Journeaux and Whatley 2015: 109).

Perhaps more than this, the laboratory approach of *flockOmania 1* explores strategies which might disrupt or recalibrate the governance of produced objects over the formation of subjectivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As Lepecki observes, an experiential shift sees ‘objects understood now as vectors of subjectification’ (2012: 75).

As dancer/choreographers engaged in an improvisational practice, our relationship to the object is self-determined and self-authored as an ongoing enquiry, removing the problem observed by Lepecki in some experimental performance of a dancer manipulated by the will of the choreographer instilling the authority of the object’s stable meaning upon them. This non-hierarchical relationship between object and dancer begins to open up the space for negotiated meaning(s) to appear in concert with the other elements of light, sound and film and for a flattening of the hierarchy between subject and object towards an alonsideness of things (Lepekki, 2012).

In inviting this proximal aesthetics a slippage across who is object and who is subject is enabled. Observing this Journeaux and Whatley describe their experience of the dance as ‘at times slowed and stilled in a studied exploration of a single object to transmit a conversation of sculptural form; body acting on object, object acting on body; touched and being touched’ (2015, 111).

### **Closing, Collaboration as a Flattened Hierarchy of Difference**

If we return to the notion of composite or posthuman performance as articulated by Manning discussed earlier, *flockOmania* might be understood as bodies (multiple) in

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

conversation with other (space, site, object, bodies, the materials of art forms). From the perspective of one inside the project, the moving body morphing, extending, shifting and thus entering into an imaginary play with objects drives the creative process. Conceived and designed to invite bodily explorations of momentum, weight, texture, sound through encounter and wearing, the objects call for a tactile sensorial relationship. As Manning (2007) has theorised, in sympathy with Nomadic subjectivity, attention to sensory perceptions experientially demonstrates that we have always been posthuman. Developing this idea, she states ‘[t]o touch is a prosthetic gesture’ (Manning 2007: 155), and thus it is through awareness of the material substance of the body that its virtual morphological shift and ever becoming ontology is revealed. Manning’s play with the idea of the virtual works to further position emergent subjectivity not as a ‘non-subject’ but one that is fluid, shifting and mobile claiming:

Touch is the manner in which I navigate from a subject position (an imagined stability) to an in-betweenness where the line between you and me becomes blurred. To touch is to become posthuman (Manning 2007: 156).

As a maker located within one discipline interested to converse and co-create with artists from other disciplines – the act of becoming Nomad offers a means to articulate the meetings and convergences across territories and disciplines I experience inside of the process. In this scenario I remain aware of my own situatedness yet my collaborative wanderings negotiate with its boundaries and borders. In dialogue and collaboration with others I/we come to re-know or make strange our own locatedness as practitioners, the charge of negative or dialectical difference between practices and processes removed as the work’s emergent qualities asserts the roam of the creative act through.

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

The becoming subject of the Nomadic project and the notions of the posthuman articulated by Manning thus mirrors my experience of how the work emerges in the example of *flockOmania*, whereby the singular instance of a finished work is neither desired nor intended. Rather there is acceptance that a new formation of a ‘something’ is forever on the edge of coming into being.

The ontological status of the work is then understood as becoming, emerging, co-created, and multi-authored and entwined with the material, situated, composite body.

As Journeaux and Whatley (2015) note within work such as *flockOmania*:

Questions arise as to the identity of the theatrically presented and oversized jewelry objects – are they jewelry, sculpture or choreographic objects which provide new or alternative sites and opportunities for bodily actions? (109)

By way of a closing my provocations is thus - recognising that the creation of the performance event is distributed amongst the bodies of many makers, in multiple moments of time and place both live and digital, the event or choreographic scores while facilitating the next wandering of the event, do not constitute ‘the work’ or the event. Rather the creative authorship of the project roams, unfixable to time, place or discipline, the real or the virtual understood as emergent and unfolding in the rhizomatic moving in the in-between. As artists we are on catch up, several paces behind where the work is heading...reflecting, dialoguing, scoring, doing, making the not-yet-known. The work is not located in our specific being but rather in the inter-subjective exchange between us and the art forms.

This leads to the questioning of what challenges this type of inter-disciplinary, unruly, untethered process brings to existing models of performance analysis, many of which are predicated on the supposition that the art object is constructed as a stable entity in

9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

order to be read. In the instance of *flockOmania*, the work is not reducible to the score, a score that rewrites itself in the doing, nor its digital foot print (web space, catalogue), the wearable objects, the dance, sound, light or film. Rather, the score is rendered one of multiple instances in journey of the work, and by extension the choreographic knowledge is perhaps best understood as resting in the in-between of score, composite bodies and a practiced practice. In this instance of dance practice, perhaps the value of choreographic knowledge is the extent by which it enacts the contingent nature of its own being, offering its becoming status as a provocation to engage with the process of art making and subjectivity as forever thus.

In the 2011 second edition of 1990s text *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti speaks to her concern that the Nomadism of current contemporary life is not yet sufficiently articulated in critical frameworks. This is perhaps an observation we might consider in relationship to performance studies or 'spectator studies' as Melrose (2003) has renamed it. Braidotti asserts that the '[c]hallenge for philosophy in our rapidly changing times is how to think about process rather than concept' (Braidotti 2011: 14). With this in mind, and following Melrose, we might call for critical frames to illuminate process rather than 'explain' dance works as consumable objects or artefacts.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> University of Surrey Roehampton, Doctorate Research (2000-2007) *Shifting Ontology: Somatics and the Dancing Subject, Challenging the Ocular within Conceptions of Western Contemporary Dance*

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<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.amyvoris.com/1219/> and Voris, Garrett Brown, Kipp & Cullinane (2015)

<sup>iii</sup> At the point of writing flockOmania 2 was in development for a commission by Parkside Gallery, Birmingham City University, UK for an exhibition, performance event and related symposium, 'Beyond Jewellery, Performing The Body', February-March 2016. Subsequent to this flockOmania 3, took place in Berlin as part of Music Tech Fest (2016) and flockOmania 4 (2017) was commissioned for The Cass Gallery, London. See <https://flockOmania.com>

<sup>iv</sup> The creative team for flockOmania 1 comprised of Zoe Robertson, Natalie Garrett Brown, Amy Voris, Cath Cullinane, Christian Kipp, Steve Snell, Steve Chamberlain, Daren Pickles and Nicholas Peters

<sup>v</sup> This position is echoed by those engaged in New Materialism. See for example the work of Braidotti, R., Barrad, K. and Bennett, J for key thinking in this area.