

REBEL BODIES

Johanna Bruckner

The artist Johanna Bruckner continues her research on the organization of collective bodies with “Rebel Bodies – The Edna Poe Club.” *Episode One* of her video installation ties in with this research. Said video installation is the result of a “pedagogy of dissent,” in which performers of a school for contemporary dance in Hamburg scrutinized and rearticulated the historical legacies of the *Workers Dance League* via collectively authored dance scores.

The Workers Dance League took part in the “Revolutionary Dance Movement” and was an umbrella organization for numerous dance groups, which were formed during the phase of leftist dance realism in the 1930s, mainly in New York, but also in Europe. Dance groups that were associated with the *Workers Dance League* articulated political demands via their dance scores, for instance in struggles for wage justice and against exploitation. Thus, dance turned into a means of “class war” for the *Workers Dance League*, and choreography was conceived of as an interventionist language, which rendered it possible to organize and affirm a collective political subject, based on shared aesthetic and affective experiences.

Johanna Bruckner’s “Rebel Bodies – The Edna Poe Club” picks up the *Workers Dance League*’s inquiry into the possibilities of forming subversive embodied collective subjects. Bruckner’s research based approach sets off from an approximation to marginalized archives of knowledge, and thus creates space for the enunciation of matters which were excluded from hegemonic historiographies. Yet, this process can in no way be reduced to a purely discursive revision or alternative representation (of historiography). “Rebel Bodies – The Edna Poe Club” does not only present past (labor) struggles corporeally, but also calls them into the present performatively. Bruckner’s work transposes aspects of subversive choreographic approaches and of worker struggles from the 1930s, the times of industrial capitalism, into the present post-crisis phase of “cognitive” finance capitalism, temporally and spatially; to be more precise, to the Hafencity, which is a prime example of neoliberalism and proceeding gentrification.

Johanna Bruckner’s “Rebel Bodies – The Edna Poe Club” instantiates cuts in the hardened social conditions of the present, in which bodies are being orientated towards maximal utilization and accumulation. “Rebel Bodies – The Edna Poe Club” produces shared affective atmospheres instead. The notion of the “club” is essential in this context. Drawing on Edna Poe, who was an important organizer and activist of the “Revolutionary Dance Movement,” the “Edna Poe Club” serves as a community generating meeting place – as a reference to the clubs which were initiated by Edna Poe in the 1930s, and in which dancers and workers met, conversed, discussed, and got politically organized.

In the dance movements of the performers one can witness the bodies’ potential to secede from forms to which they were relegated, and to assume other forms and formations. Options for alternative sensory arrangements suddenly arise, since dance affects the entire body, with all its senses. Hence, Bruckner’s work also investigates the

possibilities for a “(re)distribution” of the sensible, which marks the preeminent moment of the emergence of the political, according to Jacques Rancière.¹

However, Bruckner does not conceive of the bodies of the performers as formable material, as purely passive “inscriptive surfaces.” On the one hand, the dancers’ bodies are already situated within categories of social differentiation – like gender, race, dis/ability; on the other hand, these bodies unfurl their own resistant potentials, as well as a capacity for excess and for the displacement of established categories and authorial artistic decisions. The bodies in Bruckner’s “Rebel Bodies” occur or emerge in suspensive interstices. These interstices turn into passages and spaces of potentiality, which are capable of generating disturbances in established orders without giving in to a totalizing yearning for a position “outside” of all existing discourses. The spaces which Bruckner and the performers create are necessarily shared, collective, and virtual spaces, which may become sites for subversive connections and associations. Connections and associations, contiguities and relational linkages are central to “Rebel Bodies”: how bodies physically connect and relate newly and differently, how bodies hang around with each other, how they hang in there, maybe even become stuck, stuck on particular ideas for instance, but may potentially even become epitomes for the articulation of different affects and for the renegotiation of the latitude of embodied collective subjectivities.

Bruckner develops the praxes, which she has already worked on in the Hafency, in the cultural center Y8 in Hamburg, which is a collectively organized yoga center as well as an exhibition space. Via her collaboration with new participants (dancers and practitioners of yoga) Bruckner conceptualizes this space as a sensuous and virtual space, in which arrangements of affects – as intensities which permeate individual, collective, and technological bodies – may transform and connect these bodies, meanwhile producing desiring collective bodies.² According to the theorist and activist Franco “Bifo” Berardi, contemporary capitalism “is resilient because it does not need rational government, only automatic governance, and because it has no desiring body, being an abstract system of automatisms.”³ Furthermore, “Bifo” explicates that contemporary capitalism “is destroying social subjectivity, as the latter is based on the rhythm of bodily desire.”⁴ And this is exactly the point at which Bruckner’s work intervenes, since it provides space for the evolvment of non-automatized rhythms of affective, desiring bodies.

Past and present investigations into the affective dimensions of (labor) struggles constitute starting points for transformations of established genres and linear narratives of

¹ Cf. Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

² Cf. Brian Massumi. „Keywords for Affect“. In: *The Power at the End of the Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 103-112.

³ Franco „Bifo“ Berardi. “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body.” *e-flux journal* #46 (06/2013). Web: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationism-questioned-from-the-point-of-view-of-the-body/>

⁴ Ibid.

life and survival in Bruckner's practice. Inter- and intra-subjective calibrations are being reshaped and reformulated, and resistant tendencies are being unleashed. Thus, Bruckner's practice is necessarily situated in a transdisciplinary, transmedial, and trans-generic field – in dance, as well as in performance art, video art and installation art. "Rebel Bodies" enacts transformative translational processes between verbal and non-verbal modes of expression, and between various genres of relationality, of being with each other and together, of assuming standpoints, of understanding and misunderstanding one another, but also of standing in the way, of being on strike, and of blocking and resisting the perpetual preservation of hegemonic structures and discourses.

"Rebel Bodies" should thus *not* simply be construed as "(socio-politically) engaged art." "Rebel Bodies" or the "rebellious bodies" in Bruckner's work reside and move about beyond any form of strictly implemented didactics or social romanticization. It is precisely the inclusion of the excessive potentials of the dancing bodies via which "Rebel Bodies" supersedes verbally formulated demands, which form the dominant discursive practice in representative democracies. The dancing bodies in Bruckner's work forge relations with each other, with history(/ies), and with the local realities, in which shards of history are engrained as well. The thresholds or temporary transitional zones, which lead the dancing bodies from one corporeal arrangement to the next, harbor the possibility to evoke transformations of the ostensibly fixed state of things and to mobilize resistant intensities. "Rebel Bodies" probes and scrutinizes the potentiality of the emergence of different social formations and new modes of organizing the social. And this experimental scrutiny already takes place on a very basic level, i.e. concerning the question how bodies encounter each other and relate to one another in space. However, starting off from present compositions of the social and taking into consideration past experiments, "Rebel Bodies" inaugurates the emergence of historically yet to be realized emancipatory promises.

Marius Henderson