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ANONYMITY-SUNSET-DANCE-PARTY: ON OTHER SELVES AND OTHER OTHERS

Julien McHardy

The following I wrote in response to two essays on this panel – >Anonymität Tanzen< by Paula Helm and >Crypto Parties< by Linda Monsee. I thank Paula and Linda for their invitation to think with their work.

Sunset

>Anonymität Tanzen< is about dancing like there's nobody watching, or how our movements change with the ways in which we know ourselves and others. >Crypto Parties< are about teaching and learning how to retain degrees of civil opacity in times of massive data surveillance. Reading both essays alongside each other brought me to the sunset, as a time when the boundaries of our selves are rendered malleable. The sunset leaves nothing untouched, drawing together at last, for a moment, what we hold apart dearly much of the time. As the self softens and fear loses grip, we expand, becoming bigger-than-us, more-than-human: present. The energy that is released when we do not have to be anyone-in-particular speaks to the unsettling and liberating experiences of anonymity, self and togetherness that Paula Helm's blindfolded dancers and Linda Monsee's crypto party-goers report.

Organisms

Making sense of the sundown requires a brief introduction to philosopher Alfred Whitehead's trope of the sunset. Whitehead's philosophy, brilliantly relayed by Isabel Stenger, has gained renewed popularity in part, because it speaks to renewed desires to mend ruptures of body-mind and nature-culture. Attempts to overcome these divisions, which Whitehead calls >bifurcation of nature<, frequently end up deepening the divide. The search for authentic modes of being that is often linked to the search for original sources and identities risks devaluing observable facts as populist and nativist politics accompanied by fake-news tragically demonstrate. Coming down on the site of scientific facts narrowly defined, equally risks deepening bifurcation, by rendering those parts of human experience that cannot be accommodated in scientific frameworks mere fabrications. Either path creates painful inconsistencies. Whitehead and Stenger note, that we might resolve such inconsistencies, if we find ways

to acknowledge all there is in (human) experience. Whitehead turns to the sunset to evoke modes of knowing that would hold at once the realities of the evening sky, that poetry might register; and the wave modulations that scientists might log.¹ The organism, in Whitehead, is the being unsplit. Facing the sunset, at times, we might experience a kind of expansive presence, that precedes and suspends individualising identification, providing a taste perhaps, of what it would mean to live and die as organisms. Under the impression of Paula Helm and Linda Monsees' essays, I wonder, if anonymity might provide favourable conditions for organisms by suspending identification and bifurcation.

Dancing

Dancing, in experimental dance, we learn from Paula Helm, is regarded as embodied research. Its practitioners aim to know with the body. Some dance researchers strive to employ the body to move beyond binaries (such as either-or, body-mind, dead-alive, self-other, woman-man, human-non-human or nature-culture) that writing, for all its stilted hyphens, tends to reinscribe.

Helm, scholar and dancer, describes in her essay >Anonymität Tanzen< how experimental dance employs anonymity to break established patterns and categories of thought and movement. Her contribution that she frames as >embodied research< draws on her participation in three dance workshops. In the first contact dance workshop, dancers are blind-folded. They know their dance partners without being able to see them. Without sight, other senses sharpen, and ways of relating to self and others come forth that do not depend on the identifying gaze. In the second workshop, Paula describes, dancers are deprived of vision, this time, because they encounter another in a completely dark room. Dancing blindly, with unknown others, and a fading sense of self, we learn, can give rise to an intense intimacy that springs from the anonymity of self and others. The last workshop, conceived by the choreographer Luciana Achugar as an >embodied rebellion< against post-colonial, heteronormative suppression, has dancers wrapped in ungainly tarpaulins. The hindering cloth, Paula Helm suggests in line with Achugar's intent, disturbs and alienates chronic performances of self, race and gender.

1 Isabell Stenger's reading of Alfred North Whitehead has ushered in a revival of his work in the field of material semiotics, and more recently in the art circuits. *Isabell Stengers: Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. Cambridge 2014. It is through Stengers that Whitehead's sunsets and organisms, that he developed in >Concept of Nature< first found their way into my practice and this text. *Alfred North Whitehead: The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge 1920, pp. 26–48.

Some dancers, she notes, experience the dissolution of a well-identified self as centering and healing, reporting a new sense of self that they experience as more authentic. For others, the blurring of boundaries brought about by blind dancing is simply destabilising and disturbing. Dancing in the sunset, we might ask if the experience of a dissolving self, conflicts with that of an authentic self-revealed. In both cases, not knowing who one ought to be, presents the possibility of being otherwise, which might be scary, liberating, or both, but in any case, seems to grant a powerful sense of being present.

Transgressing binary categories, Paula Helm observes, can lead to intimate, at times comical, disturbing or joyful encounters with self and others as unbound creatures. When the holding patterns of identification soften, energy is released, that might articulate as laughter or joy. Dwelling on these energetic releases, I note that removing identifiers does more than concealing who one is. Removing identifiers, instead, potentially radically changes who one can be, because it demands different practices of self, otherness and togetherness. Rendering identifiers absent, in other words, does not merely hide what we know about certain subjects, but radically affects subject formation. Coming back to my reading of Whitehead's sunset, we can ask if removing certain identifiers can bring forth subject positions that hold more of what there is in human experience.

Parties

Crypto parties (nerdishly shortened as CPs) are a workshop format run by local actors of a wider international, decentralised movement that aims to teach methods for internet and data safety to counter dataveillance. During the educational events, hackers turned educators share knowledge of how to remain anonymous online. Linda Monsees text draws on observations she gathered during several CPs in Germany. As a political scientist working on anonymity, she registers the absence of politics proper during the events, observing instead a kind of diffuse politics that is rarely articulated explicitly, but expressed in practical commitments to mount a >digital self-defence< against state and commercial surveillance.

The commitment to oppose forms of data-driven surveillance by enabling anonymity is mirrored in the way the events are run. Organisers and participants strive to do away with the clear identification of teachers and students to create a quasi-anonymous collective. Undoing expert/non-expert divisions, here, serves to establish non-hierarchical, egalitarian conditions of teaching and learning. As a political scientist, Monsees remains skeptical, if such diffuse resistance affects politics proper, which she identifies primarily with the state. What if Crypto parties challenge traditional politics because they figure self and otherness differently? In privacy, ac-

countable citizens are born. Anonymity, by contrast, spawns strange and ambivalent creatures that resist identification and undermine accompanying logics of individualisation, and accountability.²

Like Paula Helms' dancers, some crypto-party-goers experience the partial dissolution of self as threatening, while others feel empowered. The embodied release of energy experienced during CPs, seems somewhat less spectacular than that of anonymised dancers. For all differences in intensity, form, bodily engagement and intent, there are some similarities in how ambivalence is articulated. Both dancers and crypto-party-goers are having fun, the observers report. Having fun, Linda Monsees suggests, is part of the diffuse politics that keeps the parties going.³ Helm notes in a similar vein that encountering another as tarpaulin clad creatures is comical and joyful at times. Laughter, as the philosopher Helen Veran and others have suggested, often marks an ontological disturbance or release.⁴ Returning to the sunset once more, we might ask if the joyful release and comical tensions described here, might mark moments when the ways in which we know ourselves and others suddenly come into view, collapse or extend.

Meeting other Selves and other Others

Anonymous dancing and crypto parties, considered in the light of Whitehead's setting sun, appear as settings where we might meet Selves and Others that hold more of what there is in human experience. This suggests that we fail to grasp the power of anonymity, if we reduce it to obscuring certain identifiers. Both essays, instead, regard anonymity as performative, showing how it, potentially, alters how self, other and togetherness are constituted. The cloth clad dancers, for example, do not simply hide gendered bodies. Under the unwieldy hides, different bodies come forth, creatures who, released from the demand to be anyone at all, become more fully present.

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- 2 *Anon*: Longing for a selfless Self and other Ambivalences of Anonymity. In: *Anon Collective* (eds.): *Book of Anonymity*. Forthcoming 2021, pp. 401–423. The authors provide a study of Alcoholics Anonymous that offers a more detailed account of how an ethical >attitude of anonymity< might enable new forms of collective politics and practice.
 - 3 For a more detailed account of the >Collective Pleasures of Anonymity< see Daniël de Zeeuw's essay that explores the phenomenon >From Public Restrooms to 4chan and Chatroulette< In: *Anon Collective* (eds.): as in fn 2, pp. 356–378.
 - 4 Laughter marks ontological disturbances, ruptures, and conflicts that can create openings in our webs of believe, like the philosopher Helen Verran suggests. *Helen Verran*: Staying True to the Laughter in Nigerian Classrooms. In: *The Sociological Review* 47 (1999), issue 1, pp. 136–155. John Law and Wen-yuan Lin have developed this thought further in their article *John Law/Wen-yuan Lin*: >Cultivating Disconcertment<. In: *The Sociological Review* 58 (2010), issue 2, pp. 135–153.

In the light of Whitehead's setting sun and Helm and Monsees' observations, I suggest that organisms thrive when anonymity defies, softens or queers the bifurcating power of binary identification.⁵



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- 5 Both essays considered here investigate practices in which anonymity holds the promise of different, perhaps less violently bifurcated ways of being. It must be noted, however, that the potential of anonymity to enable alternative practices and configurations of self and otherness is not inherently good or emancipating. Postcolonial studies of prisons and camps and totalitarian forms of governance for example have shown that anonymity can also be deployed to undermine subject positions in ways that dehumanize and thus enable hate speech, violence and genocide. Anonymity thus does not offer an ethics, but rather a field of struggle in which ethics and politics must be established and fought over.