“Against the tidal forces of the day”: idiorrhythm, syncopated subjects and non-assimilative community in the work of Erika Vogt and Jérôme Bel

Introduction

In the posthumously published *How to Live Together*, derived from a seminar course delivered at the Collège de France between 1976-77, Roland Barthes evokes a form of small-scale communal dwelling in which one is able to preserve one’s own way of being in the world – a kind of ontological solitude “where each subject lives according to his own rhythm” (9) – whilst living in harmonious proximity to others who, in turn, live according to their own rhythms. Drawn from a monastic tradition, this is not, “an excessively negative form: solitude, eremitism,” nor, “an excessively assimilative form,” but instead a, “a median, utopian, Edenic, idyllic form,” which he calls “idiorrhythm” (9). The word idiorrhythm comprises two parts from ancient Greek, *idios*, denoting the individual, and *rhuthmos*, meaning rhythm. Barthes is at pains to explain the original meaning of rhuthmos as fluidity rather than fixity: “the pattern of a fluid element […] an improvised, changeable form.” Rhuthmos is therefore, according to Barthes, “by definition individual” (7). It has, he says, “to do with subtle forms of way of life: mood, unstable configurations, phases of depression or elation; in short, the exact opposite of an inflexible, implacably regular cadence. It’s because rhythm acquired a repressive meaning […] that it was necessary to add the prefix *idios* [personal, particular, one’s own]” (8). Barthes’ linguistic formulation suggests an environment where the distinctiveness of the individual’s ontological rhythm is preserved within the context of a small, shared community.

Barthes’ utopian vision provides the conceptual backdrop for this article, which analyzes the structures of aesthetic community and affective communitas in two different performance works: Erika Vogt’s *Artist Theatre Program: Lava plus Knives* (2015) and Jérôme Bel’s *Ballet* (2015), both presented at Performa 15 in New York in 2015. Vogt’s work, a fifty-minute live performance, took Barthes’ concept of idiorrhythm as a provocation for examining how a collective of eight artists, “while sticking to one’s own singular voice” might, “negotiate idiosyncrasies, affects, space and power relations” in the performative staging of the visual arts model of a group show (Aubin in Vogt, Aubin 5). Jérôme Bel’s *Ballet* delivered a witty critique of the rhythmically and anatomically unified *corps de ballet* by showing how very different
dancing bodies might inhabit the stage together. It is the heterogeneous nature of the aesthetic communities convened by these performances that is the basis for their selection here. Vogt and Bel’s works are distinctive for their emphasis on individual idiosyncrasy, and their defense of such singularity even within the collaborative context of group performance.

The language of rhythm as a vehicle through which to scrutinize the relationship between individuals and their common community is of central interest to my analysis. In this regard, the article builds upon recent performance studies scholarship that employs rhythmic frameworks to analyze performance from a political perspective. In her discussion of Philadelphia public mural, How Philly Moves, for example, Caitlin Bruce, writes of the political and ethical potential of works that draw together, “different kinds of rhythmic intimacies with varying intensities,” suggesting that, “[r]hythmic intimacies when emancipatory can enable a politics of difference-based engaging rather than ignoring difference” (117). Where Bruce emphasizes pluralities of movement in her exploration of multiple cohesive rhythms, extending Barthes’ concept I draw upon aural analogies to ask what the idiorrhythmic community might sound like? That is, what are the sonic affects of a community constituted of differential rhythms? Furthermore, whilst Bruce focuses her analysis on the rhythmic intimacies generated between spectators and imagery, this article instead scrutinizes the hermetic community of the performance itself. Whilst spectators are of course incorporated into this community by virtue of their participation in the performance event, it is the inter-relational bonds between performers that is of key interest: how are their differential rhythms accommodated within the singular performance? Misha Myers’ pursues a similar interest in what difference might sound like in her discussion of experimental choirs. She suggests that the atonal character of the choirs’ works reflects the ways in which they privilege the heterogeneous over the homogenized, thereby enabling a collective body that is able to include “‘uncommon’ positions” (63). While the case studies given in this article are more conceptual than the literal soundings that Myers examines, I use the concept of the idiorrhythmic community to similarly consider how the differential rhythms that constitute it might be understood as expressions of pluralism. In doing so, I do not suggest that the expression of unified rhythms need necessarily be read as hegemonic. Erin Rand’s analysis of what she calls “choric collectivity” at Camp Courage, “an intensive program that teaches activists working for LGBT equality the
tenets and skills of community organizing” (29), for example, demonstrates the political power of synchrony as a means of “building collective spirit” for the purposes of social transformation (34). However, the focus of this inquiry is firmly on how aesthetic – and by extension social and political – formations might resist assimilative injunctions, thereby sustaining a community capable of expressing a collective identity without diminishing the differences that constitute it in order to do so.

The inter-relation of various differential rhythms in a shared context is politically complex. While Barthes imagines an “Edenic, idyllic form,” antagonism may quickly arise when the beats of two or more different drums are sounded at once. LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner’s participatory artwork, HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US is worth briefly mentioning here as performative illustration. Beginning at 9am on the 20th of January, the day of the US Presidential inauguration, the artists began what they hope to be a four-year project. Initially located at the Museum of Moving Image in New York City, the work invites participants to repeat the phrase, “he will not divide us” into a camera which broadcast a live stream of the action. Of the mantra, the artists write that it, “acts as a show of resistance or insistence, opposition or optimism, guided by the spirit of each individual participant and the community” (LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner Hewillnot) The work issued a clarion call to those who feel disenfranchised by the turn of US political events, and at the New York site attracted a steady stream of participants who variously chanted, sang, shouted, and whispered their insistence that “he will not divide us,” whilst also contributing their own supplemental commentary. What bought the work to life, however, and also lead to its shut down at the Museum of Moving Image, was the manner in which it operated as what Goldenberg and Reed call an “attractor” not only for those who wanted to speak against what they perceive to be divisive political rhetoric, but also for those celebrating the new political regime. Notably, LaBeouf was arrested in the early days of the work after a violent clash with neo-Nazis who frequented the site to antagonize participants. The performative integrity of the work’s central utterance – a refusal of division – was thus challenged from the outset, as these antagonists disrupted those who wished to affirm the mantra. Tensions built until, after gunshots, the Museum decided that the work constituted a threat to public safety. Accusing the institution of abandoning the work, the artists relocated it to Albuquerque (LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner “Statement”).
Although in one sense the work is a fairly simple gesture of Marcusian refusal, it helpfully illustrates why such charge is generated by the yoking together of an aesthetic language of rhythm, which is what the work asked of its participants by way of the chanting of its central text, and the political.¹ Almost throughout the New York situation of the work the rhythmic insistence of one party was met by the refusal and rebuttal of another. For example, in one of my viewings of the live stream I noticed a young man lingering behind the group who were chanting in front of the camera. Whenever they paused in their proceedings, he rushed forward, whispering a counter mantra, “praise God and make America great again.” Via the implacable camera whose unfolding mise-en-scène includes participants and disruptors alike, there was a dissolution of difference and the production instead of a kind of affective violent noise in these conflicting political messages. This sounding of division, paradoxically, is what was unified and cohered by the work at the New York site at least. I suggest that it is by attending to the rhythms of such works that the complicated relationship between the aesthetic and the political reveals itself, and this kind of structural analysis is the task of this article. I engage the conceptual device of the idiorrhythmic to this end because of its emphasis on resisting assimilative drives, but also because of its utopian aspirations. Whereas LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner’s facilitation of various rhythmic affects became mired in violence, I look to the work of Vogt and Bel as models of aesthetic community capable of encompassing multiple subjectivities.

Whilst the concept of the idiorrhythmic, therefore, seems to offer a promising model that might be more broadly applied to the conceptualization of communities of difference – a promise that the publisher of the book exploits with its title – it is important to state at the outset Barthes’ acknowledgement that his idiorrhythmic utopian vision was more fantasy than practically applicable philosophical framework. Claude Coste, in his forward to the translated text, notes that:

Barthes had planned to devote the final session [of the seminar series] to a utopia of Living-Together, but in the end gave up the idea. He gives a number of reasons why: lack of enthusiasm, and difficulty in imagining an idiorrhythmic life that would be an end in and of itself, the necessarily collective dimension of any utopia, the awareness that only the written form is capable of taking account of the fantasy. (xxv)
The fantastical aspect of his vision of community means that as a methodology it escapes simple application and thus invites a kind of fantastic or speculative thinking in response. In the same manner that Laura Cull argues that performance theorists must move beyond simply applying philosophical frameworks to readings of performance to instead regarding performance itself as a form of thinking in its own right (23), I do not attempt to frame the performance examples as realizations or mimetics depiction of what Barthes’ himself acknowledged was a fantastical ideal. Instead I follow the lead of Vogt in her engagement with the concept of the idiorrhythmic. Rather than merely illustrating an idiorrhythmic community, *Lava plus Knives*, to borrow from Cull, staged an “embodied encounter” with Barthes’ concept, an encounter (or “embodied thinking”) that generated new insights in its own right (25). Through my discussion of both Vogt and Bel’s performances, I attempt to identify the thinking that they do about community and to position this in critical terms.

The embodied criticality of these examples necessarily requires reconsidering Barthes’ concept from a performance-oriented perspective. While, as Coste notes, Barthes held that literature was the medium most capable of taking account of the idiorrhythmic fantasy, the embodied character of performance extends its conceptual possibilities. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the collaborative processes of rehearsal for performance constitutes a much more concrete example of the kind of “very small group” (171) cohabitation which frames Barthes’ concept than the literary examples that he points to. That is, such performances are capable of both considering the idiorrhythmic as part of their expressive content *and* enacting this image of community through shared working processes. Secondly, performance as a time-based live medium is able to both accommodate the concurrency and multiplicities that constitute the idiorrhythmic community, and to offer spectators a multi-perspectival experience of such a community. By its nature, performance is able to demonstrate the affects that arise when multiple rhuthmos are sounded at the same time. I wish to suggest it is out of the clamorous rhythmic disjunctions of the idiorrhythmic that new understandings of the non-assimilative community might emerge.

The non-assimilative community is defined here as those social formations whose compact is rooted in the recognition of mutuality of difference as that which
unifies, precisely because it is what we have *in common*. Aesthetic expressions of such community draw upon the sense in which performance, in its liminal aspect, is capable of “simultaneously accommodate[ing] difference, dissonance, ambiguity and change” and yet still providing collective coherence (Crosby 17). Where Bruce talks about rhythmic intimacies and Myers discusses an un-common collective, I use the term non-assimilative (extending Barthes’ own reference to assimilation) to highlight the political potential of the aesthetic constructions of community under scrutiny; that is, to consider how they might demonstrate structures of pluralism through aesthetic practice. Current political conflict between on the one hand, demands for cultural assimilation as a submission necessary for civic participation, and on the other, movements that seek recognition and equal rights for those different from the imagined ideal civic subject, illustrates the need for more interrogation of ideologies of community. In this regard, the embodied and collective nature of performance as a medium make it especially sensitive to and effective at negotiating intersubjective complexities.

Unlike Rand’s discussion of Camp Courage where the activities she discussed were intrinsically political, the works under scrutiny here are in no way straight forward examples of political theatre and I do not wish to claim them as such. However, the manner in which they convene heterogeneous aesthetic communities illustrates how scrutiny of dramaturgical formulations is an effective tool for analyzing negotiations of identity and power in the collective context. As such, I follow the lead of Jenny Edkins and Adrian Kear, who write of the need for a reappraisal of both what we think of as political theatre, and how we understand the relationship between political and theatrical discourses. Rather than political theatre that “addresses politics and the political through staging and interrogating its process” (8), they, not unlike Cull, suggest, “the need to think through politics and performance as modes and practices of aesthetics thinking, and to think them together as modes and practices of aesthetic politics” (8). This entails an analytical shift away from locating the political in the content of a given work towards focusing on the intrinsic forms and structures of any given performance. Hans-Thies Lehmann, for example, writes that: “It is not through the direct thematization of the political that theatre becomes political but through the implicit substance and critical value of its mode of representation” (178). While Janelle Reinelt and Shirin Rai argue that articulations of the political such as Lehmann’s are a “de-politicizing and ahistorical move to
aestheticize and personalize art and its political form” (10), political theorist Chantal Mouffe offers a way out of the difficulty of disentangling or defining what may or may not be defined as political performance by suggesting, “Instead the crucial question concerns the possible forms of critical art” (91): critical art is that which challenges hegemonic structures. The communities of Bel and Vogt’s works are convened through their disruption of aesthetic norms. They are dissensual in the sense that Jacques Rancière speaks of “a division inserted in ‘common sense’: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given” (69 Dissensus). As such they provide effective critical models for thinking about non-assimilative ethics. Reading these works as performative acts of “thinking” community provides both insights into theories of communities and at the same time demonstrates the uniqueness of performance as a means of investigating community.

Finally, to expand upon the concept of non-assimilative community and to construct a reading of the idiorrhythmic that concentrates on its disruptive aspect – the intrusion of the sounding of one rhuthmos into the space of another – I wish to draw upon Roberto Esposito’s political philosophy of community. Whereas Barthes’ interest is in how the self might dwell with others through an examination of how the distinctive rhuthmos of the individual might be preserved in the communal context, Esposito is more interested in an ethics of community that derives its force from interrupting the individual. Whilst, like Barthes, he seeks to preserve the distinctiveness of individuals – for example, he rejects any definition of community as, “a mutual, intersubjective ‘recognition’ in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity” (7) – his interest is in how the proximate difference of others might in fact unsettle any sense of ontological certainty (“rhythmic” identity). What effects communitas for Esposito is a syncopation of the social that deliberately moves us out of time with our understanding of ourselves, out of time with subjective continuity, which is precisely the kind of function of critical art that Mouffe identifies when she writes that, “the objective of artistic practices should be to foster the development of […] new social relations” through “the production of new subjectivities” (87).

While Barthes draws on a series of literary and architectural examples to expand upon the idiorrhythmic, Esposito’s work is much less concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and the politics of community. Therefore, in order to
shift Esposito’s emphasis on subjective syncopation into a discourse focused primarily on aesthetics I wish to characterize his conception of communitas as fundamentally “noisy,” which in turn allows me to consider how Barthes’ idiorrhythm might be made to yield more to us when we consider its cacophonous aspect. I understand noise in this context as what Michel Serres, in his philosophical discussion of the figure of Babel, calls as an, “unintegratable multiplicity” that holds us together in its clamour (Genesis 124). Theories of noise have proliferated within the field of contemporary music in recent years and in particular I wish to draw up on the work of Ray Brassier in order to ask, as suggested above, what the idiorrhymic community might sound like. Might the noise provoked by concurrent distinctive individual rhuthmos sounding at once produce the kind of subjective syncopation that Esposito describes? Noise theory provides a bridge that allows us to bring these two different theories of community together, and further to move them into a realm more easily able to accommodate the kind of aesthetic analysis that the works of Vogt and Bel require. If noise is understood as an interrupting force, “a thing that makes no sense in our ordering of the world,” (Van Nort 174), I suggest that these performances might be read as conceptually noisy in both their aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) construction, and in their disruption of the ability of audience members to process their “sounds” within existing frames of reference.

What I wish to draw forth from this assemblage of thinking, which is cacophonous in its own manner, is an aesthetic elaboration of the concept of the non-assimilative community that may be read in political as well as ethical terms. Esposito writes in the opening to his book: “Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms” (1). Barthes’ utopia similarly yearns for a pattern of sociality that finds a “median,” as he describes it, between the two poles that Esposito evokes. In thinking aesthetically through the lens of community I hope to illustrate the political potential of noisy cohabitation. Both works attempt to bring together the individual voices of the performers in a kind of joyful cacophony which, rather than creating a heightened transformative performance affect – a kind of transcendent “oneness” – instead favours multiplicity and mess as an expression of the vitality of a community that ceases to demand assimilation and instead allows for unsynthesized plurality.
*Lava plus Knives*

Los Angeles-based visual artist Erika Vogt began her Artist Theatre Project in 2011. The first public iteration was at REDCAT\(^2\) in Los Angeles that year, and the second at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles the following. Unlike the gallery-based staging of the first two versions, the third iteration at EMPAC\(^3\) in Troy, New York, in 2014 was staged in a traditional proscenium-type auditorium. Vogt’s 2015 *Lava plus Knives* for Performa was presented at Roulette, an old art deco theatre in Brooklyn normally programmed with music, dance and experimental performance, and this time took at in-the-round staging approach, completely enclosing the performance within the circle formed by the audience, which wrapped around the stage and auditorium. The short season featured eight artists from various disciplinary backgrounds, a number of whom had been involved in other versions of the project. Shortly following Performa 15, the work was performed at ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) in Miami.

The various iterations of the work are underpinned by a collaborative impulse and ethos. Vogt notes of the ongoing project that, “at the outset it was conceived as a chorus of parts” (Vogt, Aubin 6) and elsewhere remarks that is was initially “conceived as a community-building effort” (Vogt and Putnam). The significance of “theatre” – *Artist Theatre Project* – lies in the emphasis of the work on the staging of communities of artistic practice. Thus, the curator of the 2015 iteration of the project, Charles Aubin, described that version as turning the proscenium theatre into an exhibition space in order to interrogate, “the politics of the hang” (in Vogt, Aubin 5) – that is, the distribution of power within the typical gallery group show model. As Vogt’s project reveals, the theatre provides an ideal venue for making the dynamics of such relationships apparent.

Descriptions of the project by Vogt and various curators have emphasized its multivocality, a quality that brings together the aesthetic and political drivers of the work. Vogt, for example, speaks of the chaotic layering of artistic mediums as central to the work’s construction and interests (Vogt and Putnam). Curators of Performa 15 on the festival website described the manner in which the art works programmed within the performance, “move, collide, and overlap in time as well as space […] establish[ing] an in-between space where roles and identities lack clear definition and
resist simplification” (Performa). This emphasis on layering and collision at the Roulette performance produced a conceptual noisiness, which in turn charged the aesthetic and political dramaturgy of the work. The project didn’t make an explicit connection between politics and aesthetics in the sense critiqued by Claire Bishop – the work does not offer itself as a model of democracy that has an intrinsic relationship to democracy in society (279) – but instead critically explored processes of aesthetic collaboration and production.

This criticality was immediately introduced by way of the work’s program, copies of which were laid out on the bench seating at the venue. The substantial document functioned as both theatrical program and exhibition catalogue, including a titled list of scenes akin to a concert program bill, notes from the curator and director, images from each of the artists and artist biographies, a long poem produced in full, and various production ephemera such as a floor plan. The concept of idiorrhythm was introduced as was the work’s central imagery of lava and knives. The beautifully produced booklet set in play the multiple creative and conceptual “sites” of the work, which were then woven together in performance.

The performance began with a witty prologue sung by Dylan Mira seated at a piano on the proscenium stage. What unfolded was a series of scenes where works of art, comprising paintings, sculptural forms, video and performance, were presented to the audience. This carefully choreographed live “group show” was an exercise in constant motion as song gave way to objects, painting to light, artist to artist. Making dynamic use of various entry and exit points, the artworks seemed to swirl and dance throughout the space. This movement was complimented by a sense of complicity between the performers as they traversed between wings and stage, passing the performance “baton” from one to the other. Pushing up against the smooth grain of the work’s structure, however, was a sense of disruption which came from the expressive content of the individual works themselves. Vogt’s monologue, “Now is Dead,” intoned at pace but without expression into a hanging microphone, signaled the sense of negation or irreconcilability that the performance held in dialectical tension with its collaborative ethos.

Now is dead
Consensus is dead
X is dead
Artificial intelligence is dead
Certification is dead
Free milk is dead
Bill gates is dead
Design is dead…

The three-minute recitation reflected the ethos of resistance throughout the work, which was also mirrored in the imagery, for example, of cartoon-like knives ready to strike. This ragged quality worked in contrast both with other pieces in the performance, such as the dreamy paintings of Silke Otto-Knapp, and with the aesthetic precision of the overall event. On reflection, this was what captivated me about the work; it was a finely balanced composition of both distances – between artists and between their works – and spatial and conceptual intimacy. The artists were able to exercise their independent practice in concert with one another and with the audience, a model of collaboration that refused to dissolve its constituent parts into a unified whole.

As noted in the Introduction, this mode of cooperative production was directly inspired by Barthes’ concept of idiorrhythm.

An enduring fantasy supported by the hopes of each individual participant, idiorrhythm is something to which the group aspires and continually tries to reach and embody: it functions almost as a modus operandi, even when they know they are likely to fail […] The making, the presenting, the live reading, the moving, the dismantling the built exhibition. The community is at work: cohabitating, negotiating, producing and living together. (In Vogt, Aubin 5)

The performance was thus foremost a staging of aesthetic community, and Vogt’s interest as a director was in how the many voices, gestures and objects of the work might be made to cohabitate the stage: “This project has been an intimate one: to bring together a group of artists and make a cohesive performance from individual works; to exercises a social polemic; to play out new ways of being together” (in Vogt, Aubin 6). Significantly, the act of being or living together took place on the stage and the work playfully embraced conventional elements of theatrical mimesis. The theatrical stage as a site of time-based artistic expression provided the means for
Vogt to foreground the dramatic and theatrical elements of action, conflict and suspense that underpinned the enterprise of “living together.” The performance rehearsed a mode of being together that was anticipatory in the sense meant by Jacques Rancière when he describes the manner in which artworks speak to a, “people to come” (57 Emancipated Spectator) and are, “the anticipated reality of that people” (59). This was a characteristic of the ever-unfolding project; the work did not so much strive towards a completed end-product – a utopic realization – as it sought to demonstrate processual dynamism, a dynamism, Aubin noted, that was open to failure.

Additional to Barthes’ concept of the idiorrhythmic, the title, Lava plus Knives, served as point of provocation for the individual pieces contained within the performance; “lava” and “knives” were the “the key words [which] ignited the process” (Aubin in Vogt, Aubin 6). An unattributed elaboration of the theme is given in the programme:

Lava is a slow moving force that unites what it brings together in its destructive path. It is the background, the coming together, and also the tidal forces of the day. There is another word here that is sharper. Take for example knife. It establishes boundaries and parts. And this is how lava and knives become close to each other. This is how Lava plus Knives becomes liquefied. Lava divides in the way a knife can cut. Knife time can be extreme. Each can also be the cause for your own island. (7)

Devon Caranicas draws an elegant connection between the structural and philosophical concerns of the work, writing that: “Throughout, ‘lava’ and ‘knives’ serve as intellectual and light visual cues for the performance, but are equally symbolic of the binary opposition surrounding the tensions in collaborative working and hierarchical structures” (Caranicas). As destructive forces, lava and knives provided the dramaturgical tension in the work through the artists’ exploration of the delicate balance between self and community, where closeness is paradoxically achieved through establishing “boundaries and parts.” As the programme notes (unattributed): “While making the work for the performance, artists are moving in two simultaneous directions: making an individual work and becoming part of a group dynamic” (in Vogt, Aubin 21).
The origin of the images of lava and knives as artistic provocations is hinted at in the programme through the inclusion of the full text of modernist American poet Elizabeth Bishop’s long poem, “Crusoe in England.” In it, Bishop imagines an aged Crusoe looking back on his period of island solitude from the safety of home. The text provides the volcanoes and knives of Vogt’s title: Crusoe describes his island as marked by fifty-two, “miserable, small volcanoes” that continually hissed and sent “folds of lava, running out into the sea” (10); the hero later reflects that in his dreams he imagined “slitting a baby goat’s throat” (11). The significance of the poem on the corpus of works produced in the project is reflected in scene titles such as: “Typography of a Volcano, The Fugue,” “Eros Island: Knives Please Rise,” “Volcanoes & Crime,” (Vogt, Aubin programme insert 2). Of the poem, Jeredith Merrin writes that it, “echoes the uneasy relationship between self and others,” and that, “Among other things, this poem is about social and antisocial impulses […] forces of affiliation and autonomy” (55). Like Lava plus Knives, the poem presents images of both solitude and communion. In one way, it is a meditation on the violence of solitude. Joanne Fiet Diehl writes: “Loneliness finds its projection in a violent, aggressive landscape where volcanoes’ heads are ‘blown off’ and the ‘ parched throats’ of craters are ‘hot to touch,’ an island hissing with aridity and the replication of barren life” (20). To be stranded on one’s own island is to be abject, something cautioned in the work’s programme note. At the same time, however, the poem explores the imagined community that Crusoe constructs in order to combat this abject solitude. This includes not only animals but also rocks, the sea, and flora, and, eventually, Friday.

The tension in Bishop’s poem between autonomous solitude (depicted as a kind of subjective turmoil) and the desire for community (fraught with conflicting desires) was expressed through the dramaturgy of Lava plus Knives, which, in its contrast of self and community, was marked by overlap, interruption and simultaneity. Solitude was permitted but never privileged and community always in a state of becoming. For example, before one artist had finished their work another would often begin. The programme notes: “There will always be at least 3 simultaneous representations of time happening in the designated area during the performance” (unattributed in in Vogt, Aubin 21): even as one performer was on the stage, another was visibly waiting “in the wings” to join or displace their performance. This dramaturgy of simultaneity created vibrant disjunction through
showing us multiple individuals concurrently working according to their own rhuthmos. The individual works were wrestled from a normally benign co-association of the “group show” model into deliberate relation; they spoke over top of one another, creating dissonance and applying pressure on the audience’s ability to take each work as an object in and of itself. Vogt’s project provided the audience with an experience of the idiorrhythmic community that exposed its cacophonous aspect by providing not only demonstrations of simultaneous rhuthmos sounding at once, but also multiple points of perspective from which those demonstrations could be seen and heard. This subtly reinforced the sense in which audience members bring their own individual rhuthmos to the collective task of “attending” to performance. The way in which the performance included the audience in its scenography highlighted this as did its teasing out of the distinction between the experiences of gallery and theatrical audiences; the work engendered a variegated rather than unified mode of audience engagement through its use of multiplicity and simultaneity, whilst still taking advantage of the impact that theatrical events can produce as affective punctuations of time and space.

Cacophony as the consequence of simultaneity was most evident in the work’s final scene, “Topographic Stage plus The Conversation,” where the collective of artists convened and spoke over top of one another about their work. Seated on top of Lauren David Fisher and Math Bass’s “Far Gone Formation”, a structure made up of large painted blocks, the artists each spoke to the audience at once. As if listening to eight radios playing at the same time, it was impossible to pick out any one thread of speech. This inharmonious chattering was the carefully choreographed end point of the dramaturgical emphasis on “noisy” dialectics. Throughout the performance not only were the works of individual artists played out simultaneously within the space, thus demonstrating the affective impact of the co-presence of distinctive rhuthmos, but further, the imagistic pairing of lava and knives was an example of what Brassier calls in relation to noise music its incompossible character: that is, the jamming together of elements that are not mutually possible. The work consistently reinforced the absurd or surreal aspect of the imagistic pairing of lava and knives. The following text, for example, was repeated in various ways throughout:

A VOLCANO
Eyes are a surprise
Lava plus Knives a dream
Fire is spelled with an r
Knife is not spelled with A
So is business.
The UNITED STATES is a knife (unattributed in Vogt, Aubin 2).

The incompossible character of the work reveals the unresolved problem of Barthes’ idiorrhythmic proposition. At its centre is a rejection of what he perceives as the repressive consensus of rhythm. It instead privileges what Jacques Attali calls the right of the individual to “make noise, in other words, to create one’s own code and work” (qtd. in Van Nort 175). Yet what we see at the end of Vogt’s work, and what is carefully built up throughout, is the inter-relation of individual noise – idiorrhymy, and systemic noise (a noise resulted not from any object but from the process itself (Van Nort 177)), which results in a cacophony that in fact de-centres the individual. That is, through foreshortening the distance between members of the artistic community and bringing them into a shared theatrical territory, this inter-relation made it difficult to distinguish the particular rhythmic patterns of the various selves that constituted the collective. As a spectator, I made efforts to tune in and out of individual voices as well as listening to the wholeness of the sonic composition. The noise generated in this final episode was, to borrow from Mouffe, “agonistic” in character, and created a scene of dissensus where, rather needing to be concurrently expressed together, “conflicting points of view [were] confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation” (92).4

The governing tension in Vogt’s work was thus between the non-determined (indeterminate) noise of the individual, and both the director and the community’s desire to bring those noises together to create a “score.” Vogt took the “interference” of the necessary collective aspect of the community in the rhuthmos of the individual, as the grounds for its very vitality. Lava plus Knives showed that the inter-relation of individual and collective rhythms might sound a more complex and ethically open “score” – what Myers terms “heterogeneous harmonies” (62) – when heard together rather than kept at distance. The noisy anarchic character of the performance was perhaps far from Barthes imagination of an idiorrhythmic community as, “small groups, where cohabitation does not preclude individual freedom” (171). Yet what Vogt’s work suggests is that freedom only takes on meaning in relation to others.
The meanings of the individual works within the performance were enriched by the ways in which they were bought into an agonistic relationship with the works of others. In the model of community put forth by Vogt and her collective, individual aesthetic freedom or voice finds its fullest expression when it is necessarily bound to an interdependent artistic ecology, and when that ecology reveals rather than suppresses its irreconcilable cacophonous aspect.

**Ballet**

Where Vogt’s work aspired to an ethically oriented creative community, which she pursued through sensitive and subtle aesthetic decision making, Jérôme Bel’s *Ballet* much more forcefully challenged the strictures that normally define and delimit the *corps de ballet* as a way of asking how individual difference might become the grounds for a new *corps* or common. The performance was a continuation of Bel’s ongoing body of work concerned with deconstructing the forms – including methods of creation and modes of reception – of contemporary dance and theatre practice. In *Disabled Theatre* (2012), for example, a collaboration with Swiss company Theatre Hora, which works with a range of physically and intellectually disabled actors, Bel deliberately and provocatively confronted the audience with their own expectations of what such performers were capable of, largely through a series of scenes where each performer demonstrated their unique performance skills. As with many other of his pieces, *Disabled Theatre* was meta-theatrical in staging the work’s process of construction and addressing conflicting perceptions of what constitutes “good” or “skilled” performance. Bel noted of the actors of that performance that, “what fascinates me is their way of not incorporating some of theatre’s rules” (qtd. in Bugiel, my emphasis). *Gala*, performed some months before *Ballet* (and subsequent to it) and from which the latter drew most of its material, explored the distinctiveness of amateur performers’ ways of moving, and the ways in which they might adopt or explore the movement patterns of others. Critic Florian Gaité wrote of the work:

> In this collective mechanism, dance is thus brought back to its political and social application, its capacity to unite ephemeral communities. But where academic training tends to create homogeneity and a uniformity of behaviours, the group of amateurs reveals through its general gaucheness the
particularities of each of its members. Its lack of synchronicity therefore lets strongly differentiated personalities emerge which are interpreted through variations in rhythm, amplitude, grace or energy.

It is the sense of rhythmic disjunction in *Ballet* that I wish to focus on and will frame in terms of what Brassier, cited in the discussion of Vogt’s work above, calls incompossible elements. In his 2007 essay, “Genre is Obsolete,” Brassier suggests that the radicality of noise lies in its, “imperative to actualize incompossibles’, action which “staves off regression into generic repetition” (65). Whereas Myers makes the distinction between “heterogeneous harmonies” and what she calls “white noise,” Brassier argue for the political potential of noise itself, which he suggests lies in its ability to bring together things: “Not possible together; that cannot exist or be true together; wholly incompatible or inconsistent” (OED). The effect is not a harmony of uncommon elements, but the production of interference, which thwarts the ability of listeners to make sense of what they are hearing within given paradigms. To once again draw from Mouffe’s framework, this “noise” challenges hegemonic structures, provoking its auditors to “perceive new possibilities” (97). Bel’s choreographic work thrives on this kind of seeming incompatibility; *Ballet* dismantled genres of movement through bringing together bodies and established forms that at first glance appeared mutually exclusive.

The setting for *Ballet* is important to reading the work, particularly in relation to the field of contemporary dance. The performance was staged at three different locations across New York city: the Marian Goodman Gallery, the Martha Graham Studio Theatre, and El Museo del Barrio. I saw the iteration at the Martha Graham Studio Theatre, formerly part of the Merce Cunningham Studios, and I shall confine my discussion to that particular performance. The location is intricately bound to both American modern dance and the broader New York artistic community. The dance venue is housed at Westbeth, an artists’ community established in the 1960s comprised of residences and working spaces. Not unlike Barthes’ idiorrhythmic ideal (though larger in scale), Westbeth aspired to create a community that allowed individual artists to pursue their own careers and projects whilst providing shared facilities that would support them. However, the waitlist for the space, initially imagined as an incubator for emerging artists, has been closed for a number of years, with listees likely to have to wait at least ten years for a place (Westbetharts). A
current resident remarked to the New York Times that, “The only way essentially an apartment vacates is because someone died” (Hall qtd. in Hartocollis).

The tensions between inclusivity and exclusivity, change and stasis, explored in Bel’s performance were therefore especially resonant to the venue. Before the performance began a man seated next to me, formerly a dancer, struck up a conversation about the history of the space. He noted the change of the nomenclature of the studio from Merce Cunningham to Martha Graham with some chagrin, lamenting what he perceived as the erasure of Cunningham’s legacy. Such objection echoes concern about the regression of the modern dance movement in general. In an article for The Hudson Review Marcia B Siegel noted that: “Since Merce Cunningham and the counterculture argued that repertory brings about a museum-like ossification and deprives both the performers and the viewers of spontaneously experiencing the work, succeeding generations have regarded the idea of repertory with distrust verging on dread.” This concern with the deathliness of the repertory – and its hegemonic installation as the centre of modern dance – was at the heart of Bel’s concerns in Ballet and the location of the work provided a very effective frame for this conversation as my fellow audience member made evident before the performance even began. Bel’s piece was a genre-busting work in a space weighed down by the history of an anti-genre movement, which ironically, in due course, spawned its own repertory.

Bel’s immediate assault on this aesthetic hegemony was through the cast that he assembled to occupy historically significant space, which comprised a diverse and virtually unrehearsed troupe of performers, ranging in age, race, body type, and professional experience. It included able bodied and both physically and intellectually disabled performers. Through this assemblage, Bel explored the conformities of a range of dance forms, using the rigid aesthetic codification of ballet as a starting point. Reviewer Brian Droitcour wrote: “Ballet (New York) is a reminder that any genre is a collective experience of form adjusted by an individual experience of embodiment – from the nervous spasm of a little boy mimicking a balletic leap, to the showy joke of a ballerina moonwalking en pointe.” The work’s irreverence in relation to genres of movement, as Brassier remarks of certain noise artists, was informed, as with other of Bel’s works, by a “lucid anti-aestheticism” (63).

Comprised of just five scenes, the performance had a very simple structure, described by Patrick Gaughan, “as a series of duets pairing genres with people,” with
each scene consisting of the participants one-by-one performing their “version” of
given movement tasks, which were: ballet (pirouette and jete) waltz, improvisation,
motionwalk, and bow. With great variation in both skill and attitude, the performers
one-by-one traversed the width of the stage demonstrating their moves for the
audience. Paradoxically, as Gaughan writes, it was the most skilled performers who
elicited the greatest laughter:

Then Megan LeCrone, a ten-year veteran of the New York City Ballet
(NYCB) pirouetted effortlessly in traditional slippers and white tutu, elegance
personified. But the audience responded in a way she may have never
encountered onstage before: laughter. In the context of an NYCB performance
at Lincoln Center, the audience expects her virtuosity. Grace is what they’ve
paid for. In Ballet, after four middle-of-the-road pirouettes, being good is
surprising. Being good is a punchline [...] Bel makes the expert seem
overwrought, the slapstick seem poignant. (Gaughan)

The repertory of ballet and other forms was framed by Bel as a kind of absurd tyranny
of the rhythmic in the sense meant by Barthes. In contrast, Ballet attempted to
foreground the rhuthmos of individual performers through showing the distinctiveness
of their responses to the set tasks. Conceptually the work compared the uniformity of
technique with individual idiosyncrasy, public and private dancing, the beauty of
imperfection with the dullness of the perfect.

In the first instance, this involved making transparent to the audience the
decision-making processes of the company in performing the work. Ballet was staged
in mid-afternoon natural light, and without any wing space. The “off-stage” was
therefore completely visible to the audience. For me, of equal interest to the scenes
themselves was watching the off-stage negotiations and interactions of the
performers. For each of the tasks, we looked on as the performers quietly and
efficiently decided between them the order in which they would respond. This was
important in the sense that it demonstrated the flexibility allowed by Bel within the
constraints of the work’s structure and subsequently the possibilities for variation.
Furthermore, the informality of the dancers’ offstage communication invited the
audience inside of the normally secretive backstage world of performance, which had
the effect of heightening our perception of the spontaneity of each of the dancers’ movements and our excitement in sharing in these moments of bodily discovery.

Although the performance for the most part relied upon a series of mini-solos in which performers demonstrated their moves for the audience, it also explored the ways in which different bodies might *move together*. The first more explicit example of dancing together was in the scene, “Waltz.” Negotiating different physicalities and understanding of the “rules” of the waltz, the performers had to move across the space in pairs. Given the relatively unrehearsed nature of the performance, and the fact that the choosing of pairs was spontaneous, these duets were very “alive” in their on-the-spot negotiations of how to successfully, and to the satisfaction of both parties, move from one side of the stage to the other. There was a gentle sense of suspense for the audience: Who will choose who? How will they work out how to move together? Couples laughed as they fumbled, and beamed as they locked into moments of synchrony.

“Waltz” was then followed by a scene entitled, “Improvisation,” a five-minute free-improv within which performers had to negotiate both their own desires – how do I want to move – and how to accommodate each other’s differences – how do I want to move with you? How *can* I move with you? What distinguished this scene from the kinds of improvisation we are more used to seeing either in a rehearsal room context or within an improvised performance was that the participants had no pre-existing shared movement vocabulary. This had the effect of foregrounding bodily alterity – how do I work out how to express myself with this other body that is so unlike my own? The result was a kind of syncopation; the overall score remained “off beat,” and out of rhythm. As spectator, I found this scene both intriguing and deeply moving. The performers were given a great deal more freedom than in previous scenes, both in how they might move and whom they might move with, and there was a greater sense of spontaneity and discovery. What was performed was the work’s fullest realization of a community at work negotiating the creation of a shared score. I watched the performers bravely make invitations to one another, some of which were accepted and others rejected. A woman in a wheelchair swept to the centre of the stage, powerfully drawing others around her. She then maneuvered her body onto the floor seemingly ambivalent in her attitude to the other dancers’ attempts to interrupt her solo. There seemed no imperative to cohere a movement score that had any aesthetic consistency, instead this was an opportunity for the
performers to not only satisfy their own creative desires but also to risk – to allow the particularities of others to provoke in them new ways of moving. That the performers were able to say both yes and no to one another’s offers was at the core of what moved me most about this sequence. What it produced was a vulnerable, honest creative mess where it was the people rather than the moves that mattered most. Distinctive subjectivities were not reconciled through a unified choreography, but celebrated in their difference. As Gaité writes of Gala, the antecedent to Ballet: “For Bel, as for Rancière, valorizing an intuitive and unconsciously absorbed knowledge, which puts intelligence at the service of what we want, and is capable of destroying the inhibitions of the desires to dance, Gala should finally be understood as a hedonistic manifesto of dance without complexes.” That is, the ability of any body to dance is understood as something equally possessed by all. This equality is established, paradoxically, through exposing the manner in which, before training, all bodies and their ways of moving are different from one another.

It is this same sense of mutual difference that is important to Esposito. He writes: “the community […] isn't the subject's expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject” (7). Exposure to the difference of the other is the fundamental source of ethics in Esposito’s formulation, and this difference produces a relationship of obligation: “The subjects of community are united by an ‘obligation,’ in the sense that we say ‘I owe you something,’ but not ‘you owe me something’” (6). What was intriguing in watching the Bel’s dancers improvise was the live working out of a network of obligation-in-action: your body shapes how I move, I move differently because of my encounter with you, by moving with you my own habitus is interrupted. One of the participants reflected:

I danced with a ballerina […] For a moment […] I held her in my arms, her back to my bare chest, her toes trapped in their point shoes propelling her across the floor, while I surged behind her cradling her shadow. […] Dancing with a ballerina made me feel like a Disney prince […] A prince on my own terms. Then, as soon as I became that prince, she was gone. My body fell into the floor, I crawled across the gallery, contorting my body, pounding cement. While the shift of movement styles may seem incongruous, it felt at the time authentic and right. My expressions of ‘dance’ are valid because they are
mine, even though they are not technically proficient, even though I am, without question, ‘failing.’ (Lindsay)

In Bel’s work, the difference between performers and between their modes of dancing – which is to say their mode of expressing being – produced a dramaturgy of constant interference where the noisy collision of bodies and forms emphasized rather than ameliorated dissonance. What compels are the possibilities for discovery that lie beyond the border of genres in the realm of the incompossible, and what Bel’s work commonly suggests might be found there is a kind of expressive joy.

In this way, Bel’s dramaturgy relies upon bringing together incompossible elements in a kind of deliberate aesthetic failure, which in turns exposes a dynamic absence only able to be apprehended when the meaningfulness of genres is dismantled. It is precisely this kind of charged absence – the space left behind by the evacuation of conformities – that Esposito identifies as the source of our ethical obligation to others: “It is precisely the no-thing of the thing that is our common ground […] not the Origin but its absence” (8). He further elaborates: “it is this nothing held in common that is the world that joins us in the condition of exposure to the most unyielding absence of meaning and simultaneously to that opening to a meaning that still remains unthought” (149). It is in the very absence of ontological explanation that rational subjectivity is undone, and it is this undoing that holds us in common in both our unknowing, and in our reciprocal movement towards making meaning anew. It is your difference, and the manner in which that difference enables me to grasp the lie of my perceived originary sameness, that obliges me to you. As Alexander Barder explains:

This obligation […] constitutes itself […] through the continuous need of the receiver to respond to such an obligation […] The implication is that this intrinsic lack or debt that percolates between individuals can never fully be met; it always demands a perpetual reciprocity and exchange that in fact problematizes a notion of subjectivity as a self-contained essence removed from the ‘other’. (Barder 29-30)

That is, difference is not simply understood as that which simultaneously separates subjects from one another and binds them together in the mutuality of such
separation. More profoundly, through the interruption of subjective certainty, we come to realize that it is internal difference – difference within oneself provoked by openness to the difference of others – from which communitas arises.

In its conceptually noisy aesthetics, Bel’s work draws attention to the dynamism that opens up when incompossibility is accommodated. As Douglas Kahn writes: “The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion” (qtd. in van Nort 175). In this way, Ballet was an anti-choreography of difference that simultaneously engaged and refused the rhythmic codifications of genre. But more significantly, the performances endorsed the common capacity of its participants for idiorrhythmic movement. As Lindsay wrote: “The piece was as much about the dancing as it was about watching our different bodies express themselves.” It is such commonality – dancing, in this instance – that is the foundation upon which the non-assimilative community of practice is constructed. Bel shows us a version of the unthought that Esposito evokes. This action reveals a plenitude that emerges when sameness – hegemony expressed as rhythmic uniformity – and commonality – our ability to move (in whatever capacity) – are able to be distinguished, and when it is the latter that is privileged.

**Conclusion**

This article began by considering whether the model of the idiorrhythmic might help us to usefully conceptualize the “heterogeneous harmonies” that works of performance are capable of producing. In analyzing the works of Vogt and Bel I have sought to identify how their dramaturgies might in an aesthetic context provide models that contribute to the generation of “new practices and new subjectivities” capable of “subverting existing configuration[s] of power” (Mouffe 105). To this end I find value in each of the works discussed: in Vogt’s, the sense in which difference was able to be accommodated within the same space and indeed enriched that space. In many ways the work, whilst anarchic in spirit, was characterized by an ethos of kindness and care, of mutuality. Bel’s work not only performed an inversion of the usual power relations that govern performance, but more deeply interrogated the very contract between performer and spectator through a refusal to provide satisfaction of its terms. Through disrupting the sources or origins of received forms of aesthetic
performance, Bel returned us to a scene or site of absence, which was ultimately a rejection of perfection and conformity, an aesthetic version of what Esposito calls the originary munus that constitutes us (5), only to reveal in turn the plenitude capable of emerging from it. What enables such revelation is the willingness to accommodate noise. It is because of their performative nature that the works discussed are able to demonstrate the affects of the non-assimilative community in ways that extend our understanding of how might live together in in difference.

As such they demonstrate the potential of disorderliness and disruption as an ethical, political and aesthetic principal of community. Rancière writes:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is no rhetoric persuasion about what has to be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ for fitting it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. (11)

Bel’s work in particular pursues such altered perception precisely through showing a purportedly “ill-fitting” relationship between bodies and dance forms, a gesture that I have characterized as conceptually noisy. For Brassier, as with Rancière’s argument regarding art’s ability to collapse the “fabric of common experience,” the political force of such noise comes from its ability to dissolve genre. Significantly, he writes: “the dissolution of genre prefigures the dissolution of the forms and structures of social existence,” pointing to the ability of noise to, “redraw existing boundaries of personal and collective experience” (70). Quite against the vision imagined by Barthes, Brassier articulates a movement away from the satisfaction of the individual. Individuals, both spectators and performers, are instead, as Esposito suggests, caught in an experience of syncope – a loss of self-certainty – that then becomes the basis of a new ethics. This spirit of community is characterized by both difference – what Serres describes as the, “unintegratable multiplicity” of the cacophonous Babel – and the fact that, “Together we are this strange object immersed in clamour” (Genesis 124
my emphasis). Noise therefore, he remarks elsewhere, “nourishes a new order. Organization, life, and intelligent thought live between order and noise, between disorder and perfect harmony” (The Parasite 127).

In describing lava and knives, Vogt cautions that, “each can also be the cause for your own island.” Similarly, Esposito asks: “How are we to break down the wall of the individual, while at the same time saving the singular gift that the individual carries?” (19). Both works discussed suggest ways in which our various subjective islands might be vitally interconnected, and each attends to the care that is required when doing so. Vogt presents us with a harmonious artistic ecosystem unafraid of aesthetic difference. Bel delivers an anarchic corps de ballet that does away with principals. Both demonstrate the necessity of making audible a plurality of voices (and bodies), the necessity of making noise. My interest in these works has been in their ability to expose the aesthetic effects of multiple individuals performing at once. In their performances of noisy modes of aesthetic co-existence, these communities allow the difference of others to unsettle the “sameness” of the self, and in so doing, demonstrate and joyful and generous ethics based upon non-assimilative principles.
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By this I refer to Herbert Marcuse’s notion of “The Great Refusal,”: “The protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom – ‘to live without anxiety’” (Civilization and Eros 149-50), or, simply, “protest against that which is” (One-Dimensional Man 66).

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Chantal Mouffe’s political theory revolves around a distinction between political antagonism – a “struggle between enemies”, and agonism, a “struggle between adversaries” (7). Mouffe argues that the liberal ideal of a society founded on “consensus without exclusion” (6) is impossible, and that agonism is vital to the healthy functioning of democracy. An agonistic adversary is one who shares the same commitment to democratic principles but differs in their beliefs as to how these values should be realized. The concept of agonism clearly has appeal for theatre and performance studies because of its centrality to dramatic models.