

PRE—  
INDIVIDUAL  
ACTION  
AND  
SPECTRAL  
AGENCY

HONZA HOECK

# The Group As Cultural Formation

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the group as an organizing unit has compelled our imagination to an ever increasing degree, promising us everything from personal development, innovation in businesses to the re-organisation and transformation of our societies. From knitting groups to the Manhattan Project, people come together to organize, re-organize and de-organize the matters at hand.

With the proliferation of the group dynamic that we see in play in working groups or in festivals, a belief in a certain form of potentiality beyond the limits of the individual becomes apparent, positing the idea of the collective as a significant logic in today's organization of human activity. This holds no less true in the field of contemporary art.

But wherein lies this belief in the power of the collective? How is it, exactly, that we are supposed to transcend our selves in the presence of the group? And what kind of extraordinary agency is it the collective supposedly unleashes?

What is it that, time and time again, draws us to the formation of groups, circles and committees, when we all know that group work can be endlessly tiresome, filled with so many micro-gestures of territorial aggression and without any clear ends to the work? Why, indeed, do we endure the reality of the group process, besides for the obvious fact that we do not wish to spend our days alone?

## Marx Conflated

It seems that in the field of art, especially the tradition of Marxist thinking has compelled our imagination in attempting to answer such questions. Venturing through Marxist thought, the artworld among so many others, has speculated a great deal on the enticing power of the collective and its implications. But in the process, we might also have come to instrumentalize Marx' concept of the struggle of classes as a model for pitting the individual and the collective against each other, even when they are so clearly fundamentally dependent on one another.

In Marx's theory of estrangement the worker is forced into selling their labour under mechanized and prescribed working conditions beyond their control. The industrialist collects the surplus value that is partly derived from the worker's labor power, and in this process the worker loses access to the fruits of their own labor, which

results in an estrangement from their self. This fundamentally refuses the worker the ability to act out their own individuality. In being thus restricted the worker needs to address their status as members of their class, and turn the class conditions around by activating the other members of their class in a class struggle that can gain them access to acting out their individuality again.

Flint Sit-Down Strike (1936-37), in Flint, Michigan, the United Auto Workers staged the first successful sit-down strike, forcing General Motors to come to terms, Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

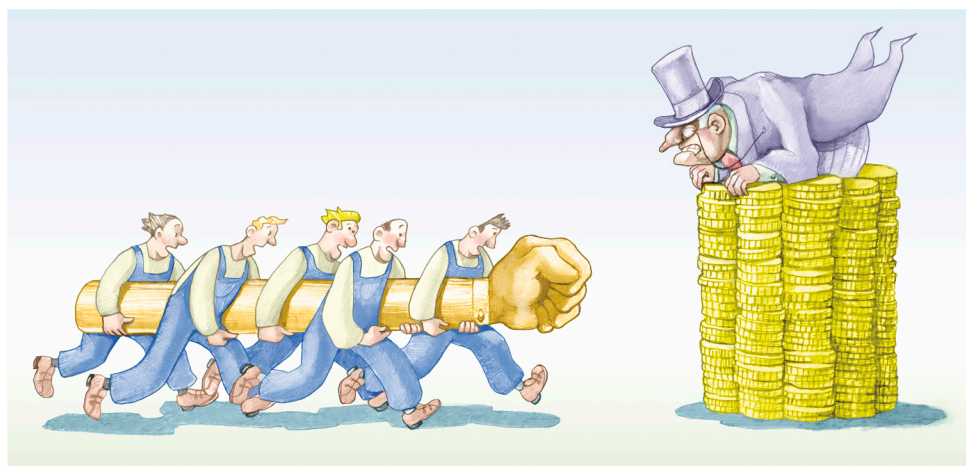


The strike is an example of such a group tactic, wielding its powers from the withdrawal of the workers capacity to work into a coordinated collective rejection that effectively brings the assembly line of the industrial factory to a stop. The workers already from the outset have been defined as a mass, involuntarily. Firstly by the imposed class conditions of life that leads to the worker joining the workforce and secondly by the production logic of the factory assembly line. But in the strike they re-organize and re-define themselves as a different type of mass, that for a moment at least, acts as a self-governed collective body, exercising a weaponized form of non-activity. A non-activity that is dependent, not on the strikers to go home to their individual families, but rather on the manifest collective performance of the non-active workers, assembled in the vicinity of their workplace, thus demonstrating the amount of work that is not being done. And at the same time, ensuring that no single worker will be tempted to return to the assembly line and restart production. By acting like more-than-one-self the massification of the worker now transforms their claim from negligible to unsurmountable. They have effectively turned around the conditions imposed on them as a class, by acting as a conscious collective. By withholding the part of the means of production that belong to themselves, their working powers, they manage to break the exchange value magic of the commodity fetish in the face of the now powerless industrialists,

and promise to return it only when their demands are met.

This is all very well known.

Marx's theory was devised as a description of a dynamic concerning different stratas of society, that is: essentially as a theory of classes. But even so, it is understandable why it is tempting to also read it as a model of the relation between the individual and the collective. After all, Marxist thought seems to implicitly suggest that the struggle of classes is also in fact a struggle of the many against the fewer, doesn't it?



*"Struggle of united working classes they launch against an industrialist barricaded on tower of coins"; Nuvolanevicata, /Alamy Stock Photo, 2019*

We can read this image as an illustration of the struggle between delegates of their respective classes, as proposed by Marx. We have the proletariat of workers on the left and the industrialists sitting on their pile of money on the right. But we can also choose to see it as a battle waged by the collective on the individual and vice versa, that is, as a staging of the relations of the one to the many. And thirdly, we can view it as a diagram depicting emblems of two opposed political ideologies not sharing the same reality at all, but rather proposing two radically different views of what reality might be.

I would argue that we often confuse these three readings with one another, or even worse, that we don't distinguish among them at all, conflating Marxist theory of the struggle of the classes, a theory of relations and a mapping of opposing ideologies. And to complicate matters even more, we furthermore map this confusion onto forms of contemporary practices of collectivity, as if they were all identical.

For instance, in the conflation of the effectivity of the striking working force of the factory to today's working group.

The matters of the working group and its modus operandi is of course far from that of a mass of people or even a whole class of society, who



can only speak up through firmly defined slogans. Rather, the group's potential is exercised in a more discussion based language of decisions still in the process of being formed. And strangely enough it seems, that the more unclear the outcomes of group meetings are, with their varying perspectives and endless amounts of counteropinions, the more they hold a certain fascination for us. In a sense, the non-productive meeting bears within it distant echoes of the industrial strike, where falling back into non-productivity serves as a token of our will to manifest the rights of the members of the collective. It is as if becoming non-productive together, serves some higher purpose. If we can endure the agonizing pains of the non-productive meeting, the logic would seem to indicate, what awaits us in the end, is our membership of a just community. Even though justice might only be exercised symbolically and not in the concrete form of higher wages or lesser working hours.

Such confusions of Marxist thought at several removes, I would argue, has weighed heavily on the imaginaries we associate with collective forms of organization, too often gravitating towards predetermined positioning, limiting our thinking on what group dynamics are and for whom they might represent a meaningful work setting.

This calls, I would say, for a rethinking of the grounds on which we base our understanding of the collective as such.

## Models of Artistic Agency

But if the individual is not in a given opposition to the group, as our conflation of Marx would otherwise suggest it to be, one might ask, where, then, do we even start to devise our ideas about organizational ways of working?

I think that most people would agree that artistic creation in fact has never been strictly individualized or truly solitary in the first place, nor is any other type of work. Everyone who has been involved in artistic creation, knows very well that other people's ideas, methods or antagonisms all are strongly co-producing factors in the processes that lead to the final and delimited reality of the work of art, or to a knitted pair of socks for that matter.

Even the genius artist, who was considered the sole origin and author of his work, sitting isolated in his attic in a far remove from the roaring social life on the streets, had his ongoing telepathic kind

of patriarchal communications with his muse, that formed the crux of his art. If the transmission of inspiration seized, he ran out of work to be done. Or the contemporary heavily-networked artist that taps into her pool of peers to devise an urgent reading of the cultural condition, much in the manner of a consultant. One would be hardly pressed to find any model of work, be it artistic or not, that is executed exclusively on entirely individualist terms.

At the same time, working collectively is not just a case of pure communal activity, but proves as heavily dependent on individual ideas, personal engagement and wild opportunism as is the work process of the individual artists.

So if we cannot position the individual nor the collective in exclusive zones of practice, how do we proceed then? The aim here is not to suggest that ways of working in groups and individually are both the same, nor that we should not try to distinguish between them. But simply, that in considering them as models of artistic production, we need to regard them as more-than-individual and more-than-collective.

## Transindividuality And The Pre-Individual In Simondon

### *The pre-individual*

A theory of subjectivity that proves productive in regards to describing a dynamic that could encompass both of these realities is the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's theory of Transindividuality.

The individual for Simondon is not a substance, as it was for the essentialist metaphysics like Aristotle, but should rather be understood as the result of a process of individuation.

The individual is only a provisional reality for Simondon and not a final resolution that purifies into an essential stable identity. It is, rather, *an ongoing problematic of becoming*, as he calls it, in which individuation functions as a constant resolving of this problematic.

As he himself describes in his doctoral thesis from 1958:

*"In order to think Individuation, being must be considered neither substance, nor matter, nor form, but as a system that is charged and supersaturated above the level of the unity, not consisting only of itself"*

So a subject, for Simondon is more than the individual, it consists of more than its own self. It also carries along with it a charge of potentiality that Simondon terms the *pre-individual*, from which further individuations can occur. The pre-individual is in a state of meta-stability, which is a state in between stability and instability.

In the process of individuation a potential from the pre-individual actualizes, but with that individuation, all the other pre-individual potentialities still co-exist along with it, in a metastable state. This scenario is the problematic of becoming, that is constantly being resolved. And which is made possible by the maintenance of a metastable system, that never falls back into stability neither chaos, but that is constantly on the verges of overflowing with being, one might say.

Simondon operates with three levels of individuation that each build on the previous state:

- 1) Physical level
- 2) Biological level
- 3) Psychic and collective level, which is the realm of emotions

- individuation on a physical level, could be exemplified, he describes, by the crystallization process, in which a crystal continues to grow on its edges or on its limits, in an iterative way – and still maintains its metastable condition, it maintains its excess of being, from which further individuations spring up, which is why it can keep on growing endlessly.

### *Transindividual*

On the third level of individuation, Simondon develops the concept of *transindividuation*, during which, what he calls *the psychic and the collective individuations* occur. They are two reciprocal individuations occurring out of the same process, but with individuations both on the level of the interior (the psychic) and on the level of the exterior (the collective).

According to Simondon neither psychology nor anthropology can grasp what is at play in individuation of the individual and the collective, since each of these disciplines solidify the idea of the subject of their research into essentialistic substances, the psyche in psychology or society in sociology.

Instead he proposes:

*"the two individuations, psychic and collective . . . allow us to define a category of transindividual that tries to take into account their systematic unity"* (IPC, 19;IL, 29).

The two individuations do not define a relation between the individual and the collective, but rather two relations, that of the individual to its pre-individual state and that of the collective to the pre-individual states in the subjects participating in the collective. So the collective individuation, comes from the pre-individual overflow of being in each subject participating in the collective individuation.

*"Beings [Simondon says] are linked to one another in the collective not actually as individuals, but as subjects, i.e. as beings that contain the pre-individual." (ILNFI 348)*

In this perspective, the collective is not strictly speaking made up by its individuals, as is otherwise a common way to see it. Since they are both individuated through the same pre-individual operation, simultaneously, the one cannot be made out of the other, since the former didn't pre-exist the latter. Rather they are both constituted through the same Transindividuation, that defines their relations, not to each other, but to the pre-individual charge. In his book *Psychic and Collective Individuation* (1989) Simondon writes:

*"...life is a specification, a principal solution, complete in itself, but leaves behind a residue apart from its system. It is not as a living being that man brings with him what is spiritually individuated, but as a being that contains in it the preindividual and the prevital. This reality can be called the transindividual. It is neither of a social or individual origin; it is deposited in the individual, carried by it, but it belongs to it and is not made a part of its system of being as individual. One should not speak of tendencies of the individual that carries it towards the group, because these tendencies are not properly speaking tendencies of the individual as an individual; they are the non-resolution of potentials that have preceded the genesis of the individual. The individual has not individuated the preceding being without remainder; it has not been totally resolved in the individual and the milieu; the individual has conserved the preindividual within itself, and all individual ensembles have thus a sort of non-structured ground from which a new individuation can be produced. The psycho-social is the transindividual: it is this reality that the individuated being transports with itself, this load of being for future individuations"*  
(*Psychic and collective individuation*, 193)

So it's clear here, that we are operating with a type of subjectivity, that is radically diversified, in that it is always different from itself, always in excess of just its current iteration of individuation.

And furthermore, that the individuations that occur, are actualized both on the level of the individual and on the level of the collective.

And this is what opens it up to speculations, I think, on more-than-individual or more-than-collective types of being in the world.

## Spectral Agency

What are the implications, then, of the transindividual, if we see it in light of the possible potential of the collective, which started this line of reflections off? Can we map artistic practices on this complex of Simondons thinking? What would that look like?

Flyer for the exhibition *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*, Honza Hoeck, 2002



First of all, and this should be clear by now I think, we need to do away with any simple oppositions or hierarchial positionings of the individual and the collective in respects to each other, but instead consider them as part of one complex, with different perspectives or aspects to them.

Secondly, in Simondons iterative worldview of our constant resolving the problems of becoming, nor the subject nor the collective can be understood in a pre-determined manner. Meaning that the individuations in the transindividual do not map themselves onto already set parameters of actualization, since this would require a pre-existing individual, but suggests a much more opened unfolding of becoming.



Such a notion of agency could be called spectral, since it actualizes on a spectrum of individuations, both collective and individual, and it would orient the space of action by indexes of simultaneous charges, that are not preconfigured, rather than on identities.

It would engender a need to revise what it is we mean, when we say something is collective, and how it is we are playing into its space of operation.

Philosopher and author of *Gilbert Simondon and the philosophy of the transindividual* Muriel Combes points out:

*"Focusing attention simultaneously on the emergence of novelty in society, and on the impersonal-molecular zone of subjects bearing it, is one node in the philosophy of individuation that proves especially valuable for us today in rethinking the political. Simondon's choice of the term "nature" for the intimate common zone of subjects whereby social change becomes possible seems to me less important in the larger scheme of things than what such a gesture points to—the necessity for making political thought as a whole depend on taking into account preindividual affective life."*  
(Combes, 55)

What does this mean?

I understand it, as a radical ethics of non pre-indexed action, of a sorts. That rather than orienting ourselves towards pre-determined vectors of fixed identities, that is, of predefined allegiances of opinion, of pre-positioned individuals, of already belongings, we could instead orient ourselves toward the becoming as it is described in the transindividual, as something that bears consequences and produces relations, but that does not rely on a selfimage beforehand. In which how we carry ourselves into the operational space of collectivity is not by how we see ourselves, and therefore also conversely not how we let the expected gaze of others shape our actions, but rather that we become co-productive through the overlapping of our pre-individual charges, in a materialization that is simultaneous and not presupposed. In spectral agency we become, collectively and individually, by refraining from the inclination to always map ourselves on identity, simply. Or as Muriel Combes more eloquently puts it:

[Simondon is] *"...substituting the Kantian question "What is man?" with the question "How much potential does a human have to go beyond itself?" and also "What can a human do insofar as she is not alone?"*