Ana Vujanović

The Collective Body of the Pandemic: From Whole to (Not) All

The Wounded Collective Body

Since the Covid-19 pandemic has had a global reach, spreading through various social strata and geopolitical contexts, nothing makes more sense than to revamp the social imaginary of our collective body. That body is in danger. It is under attack by other species. It is wounded. Its immunity has to be built. It has to be taken care of. It should heal. And it can only heal collectively. At the same time, nothing seems less probable. The wounds that the virus and its long aftermath inflict don't hurt everyone equally. Immunity is not built equally either. Care is administered unevenly.

The anti–Covid 19 measures that governments introduced last year struck the collective body with a shock comparable to that of the virus itself. Both the nature and the severity of the measures collided most markedly with the neoliberal capitalist part of the world's basic economic, political, and ideological premises.[1] Not surprisingly, people responded to these measures in different ways: trusting that they protect us, being suspicious, resisting the rules, and creating conspiracy theories. Reactions depended on the rigorousness of the public health measures, the numbers of infected and dead, as well as local social histories and mentalities. In terms of intellectual elaboration, in the first months of the pandemic some European critical theorists – such as Paul B. Preciado and especially Giorgio Agamben[2] – expressed mistrust of social distancing, lockdowns, quarantining, and curfews, drawing attention to the despotic inclinations of neoliberal governments and the sociopolitical consequences of separation. When we are reduced to bare life and desocialized via isolation in our homes, they argued, we are left without the political agency that gathering has historically provided within the democratic tradition. These and similar discourses often produce a binary between "them" (evil governments) and "us" (good people), creating strong and complete social narratives. They are useful in politicizing precarious people; however, this approach presupposes the collective of the people as a whole entity, and as such it can hardly bring us beyond existing sociopolitical horizons, where individualist and holistic perspectives have fought for primacy for centuries.

The imaginary of the collective body as a whole is implied not only in the critical responses to these measures to combat Covid-19. The measures themselves purport to address a dubious unity, wholeness, and completeness of humanity, which comes after decades and centuries of capitalist disintegration, predation, exploitation, and segregation between social

Marta Popivoda, *Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (still), 2013. Documentary, 61 minutes.

groups, classes, nations, and identities. Soon after the first wave of the pandemic, as the numbers of infected and dead rose everywhere, we heard theoretical voices trying to think through the contradictions of the situation. Roberto Esposito, for instance, although he shared Agamben's concern about desocialization, took the edge off the demarcation between "them and us" and insisted that without social institutions we would not have been able to combat the virus.[3] He repeated his thesis about the aporic character of immunity, where the immunitary function of law is also based on saving individuals from violence by using violence. For him, lockdown is therefore a violent measure that attacks individuals' freedom in an attempt to protect their lives.

Taking this more complex sociality as a starting point, my thesis is that the pandemic will not turn out to be an opportunity to change how we live together and (not) care about one another unless we change the social imaginary of the collective body. Without this, the pandemic only magnifies long-standing problems in our neoliberal capitalist society, whose structure can be best described as a "network." Amidst the drama of Covid-19, this structure has sometimes been described instead as "a whole," "a unity," "a totality," suggesting that the crisis has brought people together. But my worry is that such words raise an empty hope. In our existing network society,[4] there is no such thing as a "rupture," breach, or fundamental inclusion or exclusion.[5] Instead, we live in a world of provisional entanglements, where disturbances arise around certain nodes and links, and where some people, regions, and groups get disconnected. New links appear to repair the damage, and new nodes are formed. This localized activity has little influence on the network structure at a whole. In our network society, the Covid-19 crisis has served to more tightly weave together systems of governance, digital technology, and our physical bodies. However, within this networked framework we can prefigure collectivity through "intersectional," unstable, even ambiguous links and hyperlinks, from loved ones to allies to comrades to fellow travellers (which happens to be the English translation of *sputnik*), provided that we think using the transindividual categories of "all" (and "not all") rather than "whole."

The Virus and the Whole
With their warlike approach, anti-coronavirus measures treat us as if we have suddenly become united, interdependent, indispensable, and together, living collectively and taking care of one another. However, the measures taken on a mass scale don't address everyone equally.[6]

Gender inequality and domestic violence are on the rise amidst the pandemic, and job losses are staggering. In addition, memory and history make many of us feel frustrated with measures that restrict our individual freedom, daily practices, and interactions with friends and collaborators in the name of the greater good. I myself have experienced these feelings, while being torn between my divergent contexts and positions.

One of the main sources of my anxiety is the legacy of corrupt and incompetent governments in Serbia. Since the 1990s they have devastated public goods and sold social and state property, resulting in tens of thousands of mostly young and highly educated people leaving the country every year. In 2020, the government imposed very restrictive coronavirus measures, including a curfew, which aligned with the president's heavy-handed way of leading the country.[7] Simultaneous with the discourse of unity, Serbian media have frequently reported on how the rich have continued clubbing and partying in secret and without penalty, while the poor have faced some of the most restrictive quarantine measures in Europe. In addition, the European Court of Human Rights brought charges against Serbia for the degrading treatment of Roma families during the pandemic: a Roma settlement in Belgrade was left without running water during the crisis. More recently, the Serbian government has done an about-face on its vaccination policy, now offering jabs to refugees, asylum seekers, citizens of neighboring countries – everyone, no matter their citizenship status or place of residence.

In Berlin, where I live, the vaccination rollout has been late and slow. It is frightening that a country far richer than Serbia still has a strict system of priority groups (mostly defined by age), which has resulted in a vaccination rate of only 6.9 percent as of late April. The rest of the EU has a similarly low rate due to inefficient administration and transactional approaches to immunization. In Amsterdam, I work at the Academy of Theatre and Dance (SNDO). As a freelancer at a public school, I have to follow all official measures. Although I was vaccinated in Belgrade in April, the Dutch government doesn't have a policy for vaccinated travelers yet, so I had to quarantine upon entering Holland in May. Such inconsistencies between countries come with a price: I had to cancel a project in Berlin in order to travel to Amsterdam a week before my job starts there, and the school doesn't pay me for the days I spend in quarantine. At the same time, when working with students I have to encourage them to follow the rules, of which I myself am not always convinced. But since the risks are too high and my knowledge too little, I

Marta Popivoda, *Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (still), 2013. Documentary, 61 minutes.
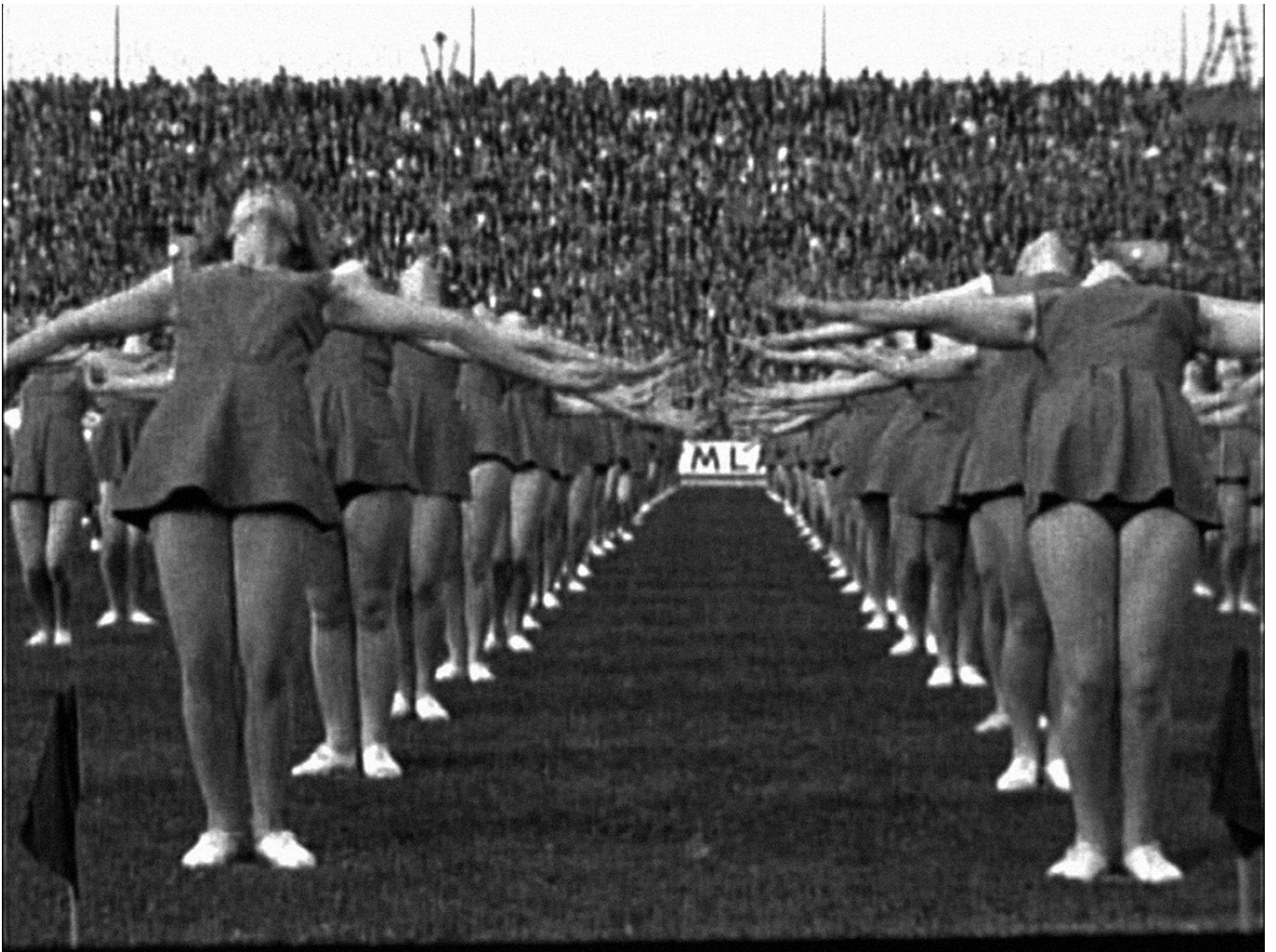
Marta Popivoda, *Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (still), 2013. Documentary, 61 minutes.

have no other option.

My experience is one of a privileged, white, middle-class European, but it points to several wider issues around the collective body that have been accentuated by this pandemic.

The first is a sociopolitical question: Why should we suddenly trust the state and its institutions when they have been manipulative for a long time? As Ivan Illich wrote, institutions, rather than focusing on serving people, above all serve to further institutionalization.[8] Why should we believe that the government, the pharmaceutical industry, and healthcare institutions have suddenly ceased serving their own interests and are now serving the health and well-being of the people? How can we be sure that the safety protocols that have been imposed are not a prelude to biometric fascism?

The second issue concerns the semantic-conceptual domain of the Covid-19 crisis. Values and ideas that have traditionally been regarded as positive have been swiftly redefined as negative. The most striking example is the idea of freedom, which, together with the autonomy of the individual, is fundamental to the ideology of neoliberal society. Many of the Covid-related measures cast freedom in a negative light, causing an earthquake in our conceptual system. Values that used to be treated a self-evident truths now seem arbitrary.[9]

The third issue is ontological. In the oscillation between following and resisting measures that treat us as a whole, we must revisit the relationship between the collective and the individual, so that we empower the individual without harming others – or the individual's relationships with others. To open this complex issue, I would claim that in our society the individual is commonly seen as a primordial category, while the collective is an entity into which formed individuals enter. In the dominant neoliberal capitalist narrative, the collective is an oppressive formation; in order to enter the collective, the individual must sacrifice their freedom, personal preferences, private property, and free will, becoming subsumed under a universal, often totalitarian worldview. Within this ontological framework, describing a collection of autonomous selves as a whole can only bring anxiety, as it implies a sacrifice and a subtraction from something that is in itself complete – the individual.

Some populist critiques of quarantine measures posit a collective social body unified against a privileged minority (governments and economic elites). This rhetoric is interesting because it implies that only ordinary people are part of the whole of humanity, not people in power. This notion of the "not-really-whole whole" excludes and criticizes the authorities by

employing the very same imaginary used by the authorities themselves – the "collective body" of society taken as a whole, which the authorities seek to mobilize in a "war" against the common enemy that is the virus. This image of the collective body, whether deployed by governing elites or critical scholars, erases the differences, antagonisms, and aporias that exist in our society, especially during a pandemic. Although I sympathize politically with how scholars make the inclusion-exclusion strategy work against neoliberal governments, this imaginary is ultimately an obstacle to thinking and acting collectively in situations such as a pandemic. In order to do this, we must first acknowledge a few basic principles:

–We live in a world of manipulative institutions. At the same time, institutions are essential for cultivating, preserving, and transmitting important practices between social groups, geographic regions, and generations.

–The values and ideas that form our worldview are indeed arbitrary. But this fact – that values and ideas are not given – also means that the power to shape them is in our hands.

–The notion that individuals are fully formed before entering the collective ignores the process of individuation, which has a collective dimension. This process embeds the collective within each individual.

The Transindividual Collective Body: Sharing What We Don't Possess

These aporic and transversal principles of living together could be a starting point for replacing the idea of the collective body with a less cohesive "all." While it may be an imperfect quantifier, "all" at least acknowledges the multiplicity involved in collectivity.[10] "All" is more resilient, open, and flexible. It's also more transindividual, which is the aspect I would like to elaborate on here.

In socialist and communist narratives, the collective is not necessarily oppressive to the individual. The individual in fact largely benefits from entering the collective; as a member of the collective, each person becomes more than they could ever be individually. This is especially important for marginalized members of society, who don't possess property and political power. However, since we – even the poor and the precarious among us – are born into the ruling ideology, we are accustomed to perceiving ourselves primarily as liberal individuals. Therefore, many people perceive collectivity as involving sacrifice and restriction, even when they collectivize for a bigger cause in which they believe. A question that can open up another perspective on the individual-collective relationship is: How is that which characterizes

and belongs to me individually formed in the first place? One answer is: collectively – especially if we acknowledge that human beings are social from the start.

This thesis was developed by thinkers such as Gilbert Simondon, Bernard Stiegler, and Paolo Virno.[11] According to Simondon, an individual emerging from their pre-individual conditions – biological, social, technological – is individuated through the reciprocal individuation of the collective. From this process of collective individuation, the transindividual emerges. As Virno and Siegler argued, the individual's actions and deeds contribute to transindividual achievements, which form our civilization and legacy for future generations (artworks, governing institutions, public infrastructure, etc.). Therefore, in thinking about the collective body we should not ask how we as individuals should form a collective, but rather how we can sustain the transindividual as our collective horizon, wherefrom the individual appears. As Jason Read lucidly writes: "At the basis of Simondon's understanding is a fundamental fact of existence, that Marx indicates (and Virno underscores): the very things that form the core and basis of our individuality, our subjectivity, sensations, language, and habits, by definition cannot be unique to us as individuals."[12]

Since my main sphere of interest is art and culture, I want to examine them through the lens of the principles outlined above. What role can art and culture play in healing our collective body?

The idea that we need institutions even as we struggle to trust them brings us back to the artistic tradition of institutional critique. Is it (still) useful to attack the art world, or should we adopt more nuanced understandings of institutions, their histories, and their roles? Equipped with the knowledge developed through institutional critique, what new kinds of institutions can art propose? What kinds of institutions could serve as many people as possible while still taking seriously the differences in identity, needs, and desires among them? Ivan Illich developed the notion of "conviviality," which refers to "the freedom to create things among people," instead of just consuming whatever is imposed on us by dominant institutions.[13] Art can be a powerful tool for fostering convivial institutions and practices – more accessible, shareable, and "friendly" practices.

Art, as an actualization and embodiment of imagination, has many times in history revised, glorified, and ridiculed the grounding concepts of our world. For this reason, art has an ambivalent position in society; it is enjoyed, disputed, feared, and banned, sometimes all at the same

time. Art can thus subversively reverse the hierarchies found within binary concepts (man-woman, white-nonwhite, individual-collective, freedom-captivity) and challenge the traditional (racist, patriarchal) order with figures such as a black heroine or a "loving father" who is also a rapist. By playing with and subverting these binaries and hierarchies, art exposes their foundation in dominant economic and political systems. Can art position itself today as a sort of "aesthetic education" that "trains the imagination for *different* epistemological performances"?[14] Can art help create new social imaginaries that aren't bound by binaries and hierarchy?

One of the binaries I have touched upon is the individual vs. the collective, where the individual is a normative concept, in relation to which we add the collective as the less worthy element of the pair. It is a standard conceptual hierarchy whose rationale lies in Western liberalism and capitalism, starting at least from eighteenth-century British political philosophy (John Locke and "possessive individualism"). Art can encourage us to rethink this ontology by foregrounding *collective* processes of identity formation: the figure of the hero can be replaced by a multitude of protagonists; individual life stories can be examined against their social and community backdrops. Another approach is to insist on artworks as transindividual achievements, which therefore must remain public goods because they depend on the general intellect. Discarding the figure of the author-genius and the notion of private ownership over artworks is one more way to experiment with the collective as inscribed in the individual, and vice versa. To make these experiments sustainable will require deep changes in the entangled economic, political, and biological dimensions of life.

These are just a few ways that art can participate in the current crisis as a contemplative, critical, and affirmative social practice of examining the collective body. Its experimental and speculative character creates an opportunity to disrupt the regular course of life and experience other possible lives. As Gertrude Stein famously wrote, "She is moving in every direction in doing everything … She is doing everything in moving in every direction." When talking about our collective body today, we have at least two options. We can either discard the aforementioned image as a seductive but implausible proposal coming from art, or, we can take it as an invitation to train our imagination for the epistemological performance of living together as individuals in a life always populated with others.

×

Ana Vujanovic is a performance studies scholar and dramaturge, focused on bringing together critical theory and contemporary art. Her most recent works are the book *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe*, co-edited with Livia Andrea Piazza (2019) and the documentary *Landscapes of Resistance*, directed by Marta Popivoda (2021).

1

I focus my discussion on this part of the world because it's the part I'm most familiar with – specifically the cities of Berlin, Belgrade, and Amsterdam, where I live and work.

2

Paul B. Preciado, "Learning from the Virus," *Artforum* 58, no. 9 (May–June 2000) https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823. Giorgio Agamben, "The Invention of an Epidemic" (February 26, 2020), in "Coronavirus and Philosophers," ed. Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/.

3

Roberto Esposito, "The Biopolitics of Immunity in Times of COVID-19," interview by Tim Christiaens and Stijn De Cauwer, *Antipode Online*, June 16, 2020 https://antipodeonline.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/. See also Btihaj Ajana, "Immunitarianism: Defence and Sacrifice in the Politics of Covid-19," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 43, no. 25 (2021).

4

Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Blackwell, 1996). Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, *New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (1999; Verso, 2007).

5

Cf. Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 30, 2020 https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

6

See Helen Lewis, "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020 https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/.

7

Milena Šošić, "A Brief Analysis of the Legality of the Government Measures/Response to COVID-19 from the Human Rights Perspective," *Civic Space Watch*, May 12, 2020 https://civicspacewatch.eu/serbia-a-brief-analysis-of-the-legality-of-the-government-measures-response-to-covid-19-from-the-human-rights-perspective/.

8

Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Marion Boyars, 2001).

9

See Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Freedom and Potency," *e-flux journal*, no. 116 (March 2021) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/378694/freedom-and-potency/.

10

In contrast to "whole," "all" can refer to both singular and plural nouns or pronouns, and its corresponding verb can be either singular or plural. "All" can signify both open and limited generalizations. "Not all" signifies a part of "all" without dismissing the whole group entity.

11

Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020). Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford University Press, 1998). Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Semiotext(e), 2004). Simondon's concern is ontology, while Virno and Stiegler focus on political categories.

12

Jason Read, "The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to The Commons," *New Formations*, no. 70 (2011): 118.

13

Illich, *Tools for Conviviality.*

14

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2012).