

Juana Awad  
Julian Bauer  
Maja Figge  
Elsa Guily  
Verena Melgarejo Weinandt  
Irina Raskin

This text was part of the opening to the symposium *sharing/learning: methods of the collective in art, research and activism* and was read on 28th June 2019, in English, by two members of the organizing team, as introductory words. The text deliniates the central questions from which the two-day gathering arises, as well as its methodologies and actors. Many formulations originate from previously written concept papers, which were used to present the project for various purposes. These in turn are informed by the many conversations that took place within the organizational team - a group of people whose constellation was shifting along the way - orally as well as in writing.

The artistic-academic symposium *sharing/learning: methods of the collective in art, research and activism* takes various contemporary forms of acting together as a vantage point to interrogate and probe artistic, academic and activist methods of the collective. The point of departure is the thinking about assemblies coming together for shared or common concerns. These are to be thought about as situations and processes of collectivization, which are neither based on representation, nor emerge because of a fixed singular identity, but which work rather as coalitions and bonds of solidarity, as well as on keeping open the borders of the common. In this way, they aim at resisting or undermining the neoliberal governance of daily-life and the current rise of nationalist and fascist mobilizations.

We take our cue, on the one hand from how current 'the collective' in theory and art seems to be at the moment. On the other, we take our prompt from the last decade, during which new forms of assembly and organisation have emerged and have been practised by the different movements for democracy and / or against austerity in many regions across the globe, aided in part by the significant role that social media has taken, including in Northern Africa, Southern Europe, Turkey, the USA or here, in Berlin, to mention a few. Specific examples of theoretical and artistic approximations to 'the collective', as well as forms of engagement in which a collective takes a central role include: *The Art of being Many* at Kamnagel Hamburg, *The Parliament of Bodies* at documenta 14, the nomination of the collective runangrupa as artistic directors for the forthcoming documenta 15, the network of artists and art institutions *Die Vielen [The Many]*, publications such as Kai van Eikels' *Kunst des Kollektiven*, *The Undercommons* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, Isabell Lorey's work on "präsentische Demokratie", Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's theory of a new democratic order in *On Assembly*, Judith Butler's Notes toward a performative theory of assembly. This list could be continued. Not least, because the cited works take into account different conceptions and phenomena of the collective. This openness to what the collective means - as assembly, multitude, community - is programmatic:

for we first focus on the practices and circumstances that shape the collective as another open 'we'.

How and what do we learn when acting together? What shared concerns or living conditions assemble this 'we'? By which practices are connections of solidarity strengthened and by which are boundaries of the common kept open? How and what are the reasons to assemble, talk, listen, play, map, cook, protest, reflect, question, touch, etc.? What specific knowledge(s) are produced in collective practices? How is this knowledge passed on, transformed and how is it being archived?

These are the core questions that 'we' were asking ourselves when preparing the symposium. What this 'we' entails - in this specific case - is not so easy to determine. On the one hand, there are individuals and on the other, there is an institution. There is a 'we' that can be described as a core concept and organisation team - Juana Awad, Julian Bauer, Maja Figge, Elsa Guily, Irina Raskin, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt. But, this 'we' has evolved in the course of the development of the symposium, including at times other colleagues, who took part in the discussions, and participated in the process.

Our effort to organize this process collectively, had its own limitations, because of the institutional structures and labour divisions of the research training group, which for this purpose had to be overcome or at least relativized. Even more, here like in many collective processes the question of temporal capacities was a factor that shaped individual participation, as well as our collaboration as a group. On the level of (infra-)structure, first and foremost, independent from the research questions and concerns we share, it is the Research Training Group "Knowledge in the Arts" funded by the DFG at the Berlin University of the Arts, which conditioned this specific 'we'. This context makes us into a group, and shapes the conditions under which we come together. Therefore, from the beginning, the following questions were part of our reflection:

How do we want to, and how can we work together? Which forms of collaboration, labour division, and forms of communication do we want to establish? What kind of groupings result from this? How can we make the infrastructure, the knowledge, the resources of the research training group available and sharable beyond the limits of the academy? And how can the symposium become an event, which brings together groups, collectives and cooperative instances which are already acting or working together - so not only 'we' can learn from them, their experiences, their concerns and practices, but so we can enter into a conversation, which, in the best case, is not limited to this singular event - the symposium - but that could develop a longer duration or lead to further encounters and shared engagements?

Finally, these questions led to our cooperation with District \* School without Center and the symposium taking place here. Members of the artistic directorial team will say a few words after our introduction, and are also involved in several contributions during the symposium. We sought out this cooperation not only because there were already personal contacts, but more so because this is a queer-feminist art and cultural centre run in collectivity, which engages in artistic research and practice, as well as critical educational work and considers itself as a space in which forms of communities are tested.

With the title *sharing/learning* we address two important aspects of collective forms of acting. 'Sharing' points firstly to the common, and to a solidarily sharing of concerns or resources. Secondly, the term also helps to understand collective practices as shaped by separation, as a precondition of assembly or the collective. Thirdly, sharing also implies the aspect that imaginations of part and whole always produce exclusions; something which is problematized differently in the practices and by the groups gathered here. 'Learning' on the other hand addresses that which is learned in collective practices. Learning is important in this context, because in these practices, even if they fail or are only fleeting, something is learned in the embodied experience, which unfolds

its effects over time - something which can be drawn from in the next try. But, learning also points to the dimension of knowledge production in collective practices, in which often the question of who teaches and who learns is up for discussion; and to experiences made, which cannot be anticipated, but change the perception and the attitudes towards the world. Audre Lorde once wrote how learning can be ignited "like a riot"<sup>1</sup> and thereby referred to the potential of learning and unlearning. The methods of the collective are relevant here because they, at least momentarily, interrupt several neoliberal logics: self-management, permanent performance, normalization and capital exploitation of personality, rivalry, or the erosion of solidarity are replaced by acting together and practices of commoning and/or communing.

With the symposium, we do not attempt to define the concept of the collective theoretically. Rather, during these two days, we want to probe the collective collectively - especially with regard to the knowledge(s) thereby shared and produced, and the learning facilitated. So, we focus on the practices in which collectivity is or can be created; the methods, which reflect and transform the affective, structural, medial, cultural, economic, and political conditions of living, working, and / or acting together; and the strategies, which help to resist or subvert power differences, injustices, and discriminations.

As this list points out, we don't aim to find a common denominator of the collective, but look at ways of acting together, or working together in the different spheres of art, activism, and research. This perspective is driven by the interest in the differences among the respective practices: what does each one produce, how can one learn from each other, and how do artistic, political and academic practices change due to our interaction with each other without becoming congruent? In the light of unequal distribution of resources and cultural capital, we also want to ask, how to mediate between the three spheres (the artistic, activist and academic) by taking into account the situative, situated realities that shape these practices.

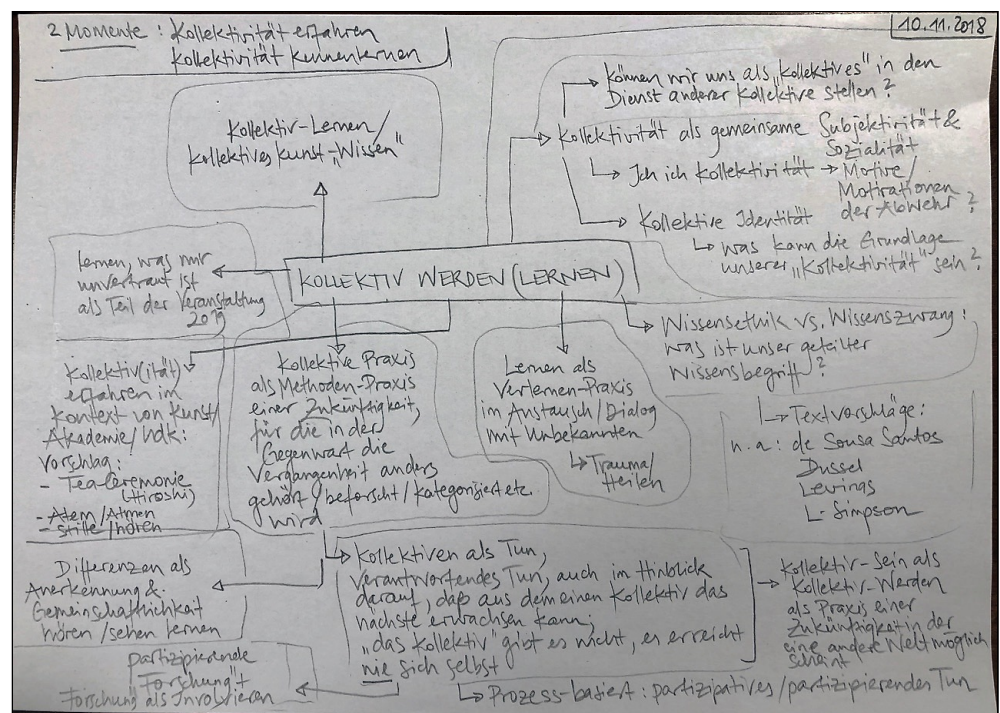


Fig. 1. Conceptual draft by Wilma Lukatsch from November 10th, 2018 during the early stage of developing the symposium  
Photo: Wilma Lukatch

These considerations led to a few decisions concerning the format of the symposium:

1. We decided to work with round tables to bring together artists,

scholars, and activists (who not seldom combine more than one of these denominations in their person).

2. We want to propose this symposium as an assembly. An assembly in which the methods of the collective can be tested and discussed in the different settings of round tables, workshops and participatory performances. But also as assembly, which stands for what it claims and argues.

With the round tables we want to open room for three topics or aspects: *assembling/disseminating*, *instituting/fleeing* and *commoning/communing*. Their purpose is to provide orientation for the interrogation of the conditions, means, and experiences of the collective in specific contexts. We start with the round table *assembling/disseminating*; in which we will discuss, along concrete examples, how collectivities can be re-configured through the practices of assembling and disseminating. Together with the sociologist Serhat Karakayali and Noel David Nicolaus and Björn Heerssen form the collective Clusterduck – other than announced in the program, Ulrike Bergermann and Elif Çiğdem Artan unfortunately are not able join us today – we will specifically approach the interaction of agency and the constellations of the collective. The session will also touch on different forms of protest against the background of the interplay between media and infrastructures, which can both promote and prevent ‘assembling’ and ‘disseminating’.

The second round table this afternoon puts the focus on the question of *instituting/fleeing*: Andrea Caronline Keppler and Ferdi Thajib will talk about their work at District \* School without Center and their subproject *Caring for Conflict* together with the urban sociologist Friederike Landau. They will also delve into the relation between institutions and collectives and the experiences with institutional critique and oppositional practices. The difficult relationship between institutional and collective structures will be taken up for discussion, and an exchange on strategies of emancipation from structural power will take place.

The third round table *commoning/communing* will take place tomorrow morning. There, Ulrike Hamann of the neighbourhood initiative Kotti & Co, Zuzana Tabačková and Zuzana Révészová of Spolka and the art critic Erden Kosova, who joined the SiS collective for their recent exhibition, will talk about methods to counter different, partly threatened urban conditions of life, and ask how commoning can be practiced under these circumstances. In doing so they will ask which form of acting together can do justice to a relational understanding of the commons and whether a new form of ‘sharing’ can emerge from it.

The workshops provide the opportunity to get to know practices from different fields, as well as to test, to exercise but also to question them – and thereby probe the ways of acting or working together of the invited groups or collectives. On both days there are three workshops each – taking place at the same time. Today you can either participate in a theatre practice with Anika Lachnitt and the Theaterlinge; map and rethink social media platforms with the collective Clusterduck or explore the sensuality and relationality of knowledge transfer while cooking with Pédra Costa.

Tomorrow one can either learn and experience the resistive practice of movement and thought with the dance collective Grupo Oito; discuss the relationship of art and activism, embodiment and the political with the cultural theorist Irina Kaldrack and the artist Timo Herbst; or reflect on the spatial aspects of collectivity with Spolka – a collective of architects, urban planners and sociologists. You can register for the workshops on the same day at the information desk. So, if you haven’t registered yet, you can do so in the break after the first round table. Some workshops can be bigger than others, but we hope that nonetheless you find space in the workshop of your choice. It is our aim that all of you can take part in one of the workshops today and one tomorrow.

We will also experience two performances that offer along their own choreographies, the possibility to gather and exchange. Under the title *eating, playing, sharing*

, we will close today's program with a shared meal, through which you will be guided by performance artist Pêdra Costa and their workshop-participants. Tomorrow the symposium will be closed with the *Club of Im\_Possibilities*, initiated by artist and curator Nuray Demir. It will create a space to reflect the shared experience in these two days, and to think further about the questions and concerns raised, in informal talks with tea.

Before handing over the microphone to District and then begin with our first round table, some organisational information:

The program, and all information you might need is at the front desk, where you hopefully already registered for a workshop. If you have any questions, you will always find one person from the team there.

Food and drinks are provided: There are drinks available during the whole time (water is free). On both days we have a 90 minutes lunch break at 12.30 h and at 5 pm a 30 minute coffee break. The food is prepared by Rosa Negra Vegan Catering, whom we thank very much! We have our sitting area outside around the corner of the building, but we can also use the green area behind the building.

There is a wheel chair accessible toilet outside across the entrance of this hall. We would like to ask everybody else to use the other toilets located through that door [*point in the direction*].

The Malzfabrik is a large area with many events happening at the same time. During these two days starting at 4pm there is a Gin festival right next door, and we cannot anticipate if this will affect the symposium. We, of course, are ready to spontaneously react to however this develops, but more importantly, if any problems occur, or you feel insecure, you can address Julian Bauer and Sebastian Köthe (or ask for them at the information desk).

Finally we want to say thank you: to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the Berlin University of the Arts for their financial support; Jenny Baese for designing the poster and print materials; Nico LeFort for the technical assistance; the research students Xin Wang and Sarah Hampel, as well as the leads of the Research Training Group Barbara Gronau and Kathrin Peters, and our colleagues for their important contribution and support.

We want to especially thank our guests, who have shared their knowledge and ideas with us in the many preparatory meetings. Without their effort the symposium would be impossible.

Also, we want to thank you all for your participation and wish us all two good days of sharing and learning together.

Last but not least a big thank you to District \* School without Center, who made possible that the symposium takes place in this space of collective practices and to whom we hand over the word now.



Fig. 2.

At the back of the Malzfabrik

Photo: Maximilian Haas. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen der Künste"

- 1 Lord, Audre: "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich", in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkley 2012, p. 98.