NEGATIVE DRAMATURGIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF *PRODUCTIVE NEGATION*

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

Signature:_____ Date: JUNE 21, 2019

Abstract

The content of this dissertation is a cognitive map of divergent methodologies that contributed to the creation of a practice based on physical and conceptual, academic and non-academic, modes of knowledge-making and knowledge-gathering. I will show how the act of negating, whether verbally or through conceptual strategies, elucidates the untapped potential of dance- or theatre-making processes. Weaving together a collection of ideas by academics, thinkers and makers from a variety of disciplines, together with the design of my own negative dramaturgy (which I have preliminarily coined here as *Productive Negation*), I aim to bring the omniscient negativity of dramaturgy into focus as a mobilizing, dynamic strategy for invention. The act of negation embodies a powerful force of conviction that clarifies muddled subjectivity popular in art criticism today, and yet it leaves enough room for focused investigation. This can be seen in the proposed four-step working model of *Productive Negation* based on Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process*. Far from being an in-depth discourse on theories of negation, *Productive Negation* is a methodology that attempts to marry theoretical and practical applications through the interpretive voice of the dramaturg in a collaborative environment.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One: Introduction

There is a darkness to dramaturgy, a subterranean feeling embedded in the practice's ancestry – pale, thin men hidden in the recesses of theatres, writing and thinking, in utter servitude to the theatre's conscience (Friedman, 2002:np). Perhaps we, as dramaturgs, are comfortable here in this liminality, this "quasi-nothingness" (Lepecki, 2011:189)[1]. We still carry the spirit of the alterity within us, a focused earth energy unafraid of its own muted authorship despite, in recent times, no longer being literary shadowfigures. Recently, in my personal collaborative artistic practice, I have attempted to draw power from this darkness, from the troubled dynamic between the dance/theatre-maker[2] and the dramaturg, one in servitude to the audience, one in servitude to the process. The work of dramaturgy lies in this awareness of the trouble it causes, in its subtly antagonistic nature, without which there is no conceptual resonance, no accountability to artistic impulse. Even in the absence of a dramaturg, dramaturgical thinking is still present, manifesting itself through questioning, through decision-making and careful execution. Inherently, dramaturgy works through the negation of unexamined whimsy and through the implementation of a negative reinforcement process, whether consciously or subconsciously. Assuming that dramaturgy as a working process is committed to the productive manifestation of a product within the frameworks of performance, negative dramaturgy (or dramaturgies: as relating to a variety of different

[1] Throughout this study I will keep returning to André Lepecki's idea of "quasi-nothingness" as it speaks to the idea of the dramaturg and dramaturgical work, especially in the dance context, as unacknowledged in the productive aspects of creating. Rather, the dramaturgs, in their necessary preoccupation with "errancy, erring, and error", obstruct the productive flow of the work. According to Lepecki, this incites "anxiety" in the dance maker, and further propels the role of the dramaturg towards precarity. Lepecki insists that this "tension" between "knowing and owning" is what banishes the dramaturg to a state of "quasi-nothingness". The dramaturg does not work for the choreographer, but instead works for the work (Lepecki, 2011:181-190).

[2] As I am primarily writing in the context of my own practice and background I have posited dance-makers as the main protagonists of this dissertation. However, every now and again I will expand the field to include theatre-makers or art-makers in order to emphasise the conceptual or theoretical flexibility of a certain methodology or statement in the context of performance as-a-whole.

approaches) does not imply the absence of dramaturgy or even the absence of dramaturgical productivity. Rather, it implies a strategy whereby seemingly antagonistic processes disrupt expected creative probabilities.

It is this spirit of alterity that interests me, not in dramaturgy's ancient context, in its "house arrest" as Derrida would say (Derrida, 1995:2)[3], but rather in its most contemporary expressions: practices that embrace obstructive methodologies in spite of the overwhelming dogma of fervent productivity so prevalent in rehearsal rooms today. Yet, as Nick Salvato argues, it is obstruction itself that "forms the basis for and sustains material manifestations of generative thinking" (Salvato, 2016:1)[4]. With this in mind, I attempt in this dissertation to explore existing dramaturgical, methodological or theoretical approaches in practice today that are deliberately negative, obstructive, troubled, or problematic without a total annihilation of the (theatrical) work they support, as well as, in the second part, a new negative dramaturgy of my own making.

There is a tension here, admittedly, between obstruction/production and negative/positive use. In curbing aspects of the creative process, we continue to promote a "generative" environment. An obstructive methodology is still a methodology, a practice of doing, of duration. It is therefore important to admit that in the context of this study I am shaping my definition of negativity on the constraints of what is known as negative theology. Simply speaking, negative or apophatic theology is a theoretical approach to understanding

[3] "It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret. (It is what is happening, right here, when a house, the Freuds' last house, becomes a museum: the passage from one institution to another.)"

[4] In his book, *Obstruction*, Nick Salvato discusses the academic and sociological value of embarrassment, laziness, slowness, cynicism and digressiveness, in that order, as "phenomena" that "are almost always taken to be incompatible with and detrimentally obstructive to scholarly inquiry, but they may, if properly directed, be conducive to critical work and valuable, more broadly, for intellectual life" (Salvato, 2016:1). Salvato's work on obstruction helped me frame my thinking about how non-academic things, like making a dance, can be treated as academic through the use of specific research and linguistic structures. Additionally, Salvato and I align on the basic premise that blockages are indications of potentiality.

what a thing is, by defining what it is not. In *The Guide For The Perplexed*, a twelfth century document first translated from Arabic to English at the close of the 1800s, Maimonides writes that "the negative attributes have this in common with the positive, that they necessarily circumscribe the object to some extent, although such circumscription consists only in the exclusion of what otherwise would not be excluded" (Maimonides, 2002:82). By shifting the focus from what is seen to what is not seen (what otherwise would be excluded), new potentialities are awakened. What is not seen cannot be discovered without an admission of what is seen; the negative persists in the context of the positive.

The recent international resurgence of dramaturgy, and the dramaturg in particular, has resulted in many texts attempting to legitimize the importance of the role of the dramaturg by emphasizing its productive aspects, the subtext of which is *we need you to need us*[5]. For this new generation of dramaturgs, there is a sense of desperation to be liked by the collective. We worry about usurping authority, about over-stepping boundaries. We worry that we won't be invited to work on the next project, because we have seen it happen to our colleagues, or we have experienced it ourselves. We wonder how to *be* in each new context, and we find it difficult to gauge the expectations of our collaborators. As indicated above, in *We are not ready for the dramaturge*, André Lepecki mentions the dramaturg[6] as inhabiting the space of "quasi-nothingness" (Lepecki, 2011:189). He reasons that this "dis-unity" is due to the perception that the dramaturg "questions the authorial stability of those that are supposed to know the work-to-come" (188). More and more, in a climate of intensely socially motivated

[5] For example: "Do I Really Need A Dramaturg?" by N. Wozny in Dance Magazine on March 30, 2018, and "The Dramaturg: Help or Hindrance" by D. Friedman originally published by Backstage.com on September 26, 2002.

[6] Lepecki chooses, even in this fairly recent article, to use the more traditional spelling for "dramaturge", perhaps to create some academic distance by harkening back to the original French spelling. In my experience, this spelling is being phased out in preference for "dramaturg", as its simple, hard "g" sound at the end seems more gender-neutral and is easier to pronounce. Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosino Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou have adopted the latter version throughout their book *Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance* (2016), and I have followed suit.

positive affirmation we have had to learn to rephrase challenging directives as gentle prods. Thankfully, no one is getting hit by their ballet master's walking stick anymore, though the pendulum has swung so far in obversion that we have simply forgotten how to say *no*.

I speak, of course, in the context of my own experience, having started out as a dancer in the type of ballet schools where verbal abuse was considered a teaching methodology. I speak from the experience of contemporary dance training in a small American Liberal Arts college with one dance studio between 80 dance students. I speak from my experience at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, which was an immensely privileged time under the considerate guidance of Sara Rudner, Peggy Gould and Dan Hurlin –mentors, and now friends, who disrupted my youthful acceptance of what dance is, was and could be. And finally, I speak from my experience as a freelance artist in Cape Town, and my subsequent migration to Amsterdam, which is the physical context I now find myself in as a dramaturg.

Aims & Questions:

With this dissertation, I will show how the act of negating, whether verbally or through conceptual strategies, elucidates the untapped potential of dance- or theatre-making processes. Weaving together a collection of ideas by academics, thinkers and makers from a variety of disciplines, together with the design of my own negative dramaturgy (which I have preliminarily coined here as *Productive Negation*), I aim to bring the omniscient negativity of dramaturgy into focus as a mobilizing, dynamic strategy for invention.

How then, do we productively say *no* in a collaborative, creative environment? Not only *how*, but to whom? How do we maintain professionalism while navigating the psychologically risky waters that negative reinforcement can incite? What methodologies are currently in practice that aim to undermine the artist or the creative process, instead of

placating or radically accepting the artist's whims? How can current methodologies be updated to include a more expansive integration of constructive, negative feedback?

Definitively, the *no* I speak of is not the *no* of Plato's 'Stranger', a *no* of otherness or difference (Plato, 1997:1331)[7], and, consequently, the historical perception of negative statements as somehow "less valuable than affirmative ones, in being less specific or less informative" (Horn, 2001:1). It is also not the *no* of the I-Ching, denoting creativity (activity) to the affirmative Yang, and reception (passivity) to the negative Yin (Horn, 2001:160). Rather, as practitioners of these proposed negative dramaturgies, our *noes* are embodied by our "destructive characters": we thrive in misunderstanding and discomfort; we see solutions but do not enact them (Benjamin, 2005:541-543). Our *noes* are brute forces whereby "the brutality of the act runs alongside the poetic potential of what the act…releases" (Leslie, 2015:49).

I'm drifting into manifesto, but I'm encouraged by the strength of my conviction, or perhaps even my "willfulness" (in Ahmed's words), to create "risks in strengthening an impression" (Ahmed, 2014:17)[8]. It is in fact my only aim: to collect current and emerging creative practice methodologies that push the theatre or dance-making processes toward a place of risk, and also to create and implement my own system of negative dramaturgy. What follows is a collection of ideas about this *via negativa*, this darker road of dramaturgy.

[7] "There is no need to be surprised, stranger: this is what we do here; probably you handle these things differently."

[8]Ahmed's "willful subject" also bears resemblance to the dramaturg that I am trying to describe here –a dramaturg that inhabits Lepecki's "quasi-nothingness" (Lepecki, 2011:189), as well as Walter Benjamin's "destructive character" (Benjamin, 2005:54, mentioned on page 9). Ahmed explains that "will can be rearticulated in terms of the not: whether understood as possibility or capacity, as the possibility of not being compelled by an external force… or as the capacity to say or enact a "no" to what has been given as instruction. Indeed, wilfulness as a judgment tends to fall on those who are not compelled by the reasoning of others" (Ahmed, 2014:15).

Methodology & Structure:

The content of this dissertation is a cognitive map of divergent methodologies that contributed to the creation of a practice based on physical and conceptual, academic and non-academic, modes of knowledge-making and knowledge-gathering. As I will discuss in more detail later, the difficulty of defining, in academic terms, where to place the methodology that I employed for the current iteration of this work is a result of non-linear, convergent processes that frequently vacillated between reading performance, sociological, philosophical and historical theory, performative experimentation (both on- and off-stage), workshop participation, workshop facilitation, memory and anecdote. As these research tactics collude to form the overarching methodology that I posit throughout this dissertation, I urge toward a consideration of the entire content of the dissertation as a detailed exploration and documentation of methodology itself.

In the next chapter, *Negative Dramaturgies,* I briefly address what I perceive to be the main characteristics of negative dramaturgies, namely an embodiment of Benjamin's "destructive character", the ability to selectively sabotage (through the lens of Lepecki and Arabella Stranger), and Katherine Profeta and Bojana Cvejić's[9] "questioning" methodologies. In *Mythology of Productive Negation*, I trace a personal journey towards the creation of this aspiring dramaturgical system through a retrospective of my experiences with pedagogies of dissent, risk and failure, while simultaneously showing the historical underpinnings in the development of these methods and their connections to dramaturgical thought. *Critique of The Critical Response Process* serves as the introduction to the step-by-step programme proposed and implemented in *Productive Negation.* Here I take a closer look at the popular feedback

[9] Brussels-based performance theorist and dramaturg, Bojana Cvejić, introduced her idea of the "methodology of problem" in her essay *The Ignorant Dramaturg* in 2010. She explains: "Stating a problem isn't about uncovering an already existing question or concern, something that was certain to emerge sooner or later, a problem is not a rhetorical question that can't be answered. On the contrary, to raise a problem implies constructing terms in which it will be stated, and conditions it will be solved in" (Cvejić, 2010).

system known as the Critical Response Process, invented by American choreographer and dance educator, Liz Lerman in the late 1970s. I propose a re-examination of the system's out-of-date social and economic politics by posing alternative and oppositional strategies based on the system's own four-step programme. Three smaller sections precede *The Four Steps of Productive Negation and Field Notes*. These sections are: *Productive Negation*, a linguistic note, and a short poetic intervention; *Theoretical Working Model of Productive Negation*, during which I define the term*;* and *Statement of Intent for the workshops*, concerning the workshops I taught in the US during the summer of 2017. In *The Four Steps of Productive Negation and Field Notes* I lay bare the theory surrounding *Productive Negation* as an active dramaturgical feedback and compositional generating system, including detailed field notes from my practical engagement with the work. During this section I return to the writings of Profeta and Cvejić, with additional theoretical framing via Claire Bishop, and brief mentions of Marianne van Kerkhoven, Lepecki, Yvonne Rainer and John Roberts. *The Future of Productive Negation* interrogates the shortcomings of the four-step programme by using the system on itself, in a gesture of meta-analysis, before concluding the dissertation in the obligatory way.

It is not my aim, throughout this study, to harm dramaturgy's reputation by exposing its dissent. Nor, as Beckett might have done with the concept of the parable when he wrote *Waiting for Godot* (Anders, 1965:141)[10] do I presume to inversely transform dramaturgy, the dramaturg, or the workability of the practice itself simply by speaking against it. Instead the chapters that follow serve as evidence of a personal experience with negative dramaturgies, and more deeply, of my engagement with an understanding of an alternative potentiality that the practice of dramaturgy elicits: rooted in antithesis, manifested in tenebrosity.

[10] "Although it is, so to say, a *negative* fable, it nevertheless remains a fable. For despite the fact that no active maxims can be derived from it, the play remains on the level of abstraction." (Emphasis in original.)

Chapter Two: Negative Dramaturgies

The conceptual and temporal progress of art and performance is indistinguishable from the procedures by which it has been, historically, destroyed. Those that have negated popular artistic impulses either critically or practically have pushed art, its processes and its reception to new limits with every defiant action. Saying *no* is the original creative step towards potential, and potentiality is the medium of the dramaturg. Benjamin, in his 1931 essay, *The Destructive Character*, urges toward a focus on impermanence, through which, he says, possibilities will be revealed:

> Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. (Benjamin, 2005:542)

Benjamin's "destructive character" bears resemblance to Lepecki's dramaturg. In addition to "seeing ways everywhere", the destructive character "avoids creative work", "tolerates misunderstanding", and does not "look for comfort" (Benjamin, 2005:542). Lepecki's dramaturg is also destructive. He "destroys the figure of 'the one who is supposed to know' (Lepecki, 2011:181)", his presence does not inspire "hospitality" (Lepecki, 2011:185), and he does not create, he does not "own" anything (Lepecki, 2011:187). Lepecki's dramaturg not only tolerates misunderstanding, but uses it as a tool, "erring into texts [to] allow [him] to extract possibilizations that would otherwise remain hidden, or dormant, or repressed, or censored (Lepecki, 2011:193)".

Saying *no*, dramaturgically speaking, aims to produce an environment of criticality (rubble) in the rehearsal studio in which no creative solution is left undiscovered due to an expansion of procedural cognizance to include obscured impulses. In other words, the act of negation incites an ardent creative productivity that affirmation may not have the ability to access. Standing at the crossroads means standing on the verge of infinite potential.

> *No* is a question, *yes* is an answer. *No* leaves us unsatisfied, wanting more, asking, admitting that we do not have the answers. *No* pushes against verticality, pushes against dogmatism, pushes us to listen. (Holloway, 2005:269)

As affirmation encourages possibilities without having to acknowledge the potentiality set forth by the emergent conditions in which the solution exists, negation indicates precisely the awareness and recognition of unspoken possibilities that is taken for granted in the unquestioning *yes*. It is my contention that negation/negative statements/*no* are insights that, if attuned to, can provide provocative revelations in the process of creative discovery. Dramaturgically, procedural cognizance in the process of theatre-making thus includes both the ability to oppose, and to recognize negative linguistic clues that might encourage developmental potentiality by using these tools of negation against (but to the benefit of) the artist's own opposing impulses.

Negative dramaturgies can express an "affirmative sabotage" as first mentioned by Gayatri Spivak in the notes to the introduction of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (Spivak, 2012:510) and developed by Nikita Dhawan in her essay, *Affirmative Sabotage of the Master's Tools*:

> The saboteur aims to subvert through obstruction and disruption, through intentionally withdrawing efficiency. (Dhawan, 2014:71)

Lepecki's example of his student as "dramaturge as saboteur", where "she would work without rest pointing everyone in the wrong direction", shows one way in which working against efficiency forced the collaboration to reach new conclusions:

> Totally lost they worked and worked and worked […] until finally something else, something altogether different from what had been conceived as initial point of departure and arrival, started to vaguely take shape. (Lepecki, 2011, 197)

Negative dramaturgies may provoke this type of affirmative sabotage, though they are not dramaturgies of sabotage. If dramaturgies of sabotage are "particular 'weavings' of action that *emerge from* but *work against* artistic productions and that are initiated from within productions by any one of their makers (including those who come to the production at or

after the point of its performance)" (Stranger, 2016:210, emphasis in original), echoed in Lepecki's example, and a "dramaturgical mode designed to interrogate, expose, and reorganize the social and economic contracts between those involved in the making of performance" (Stranger, 2016:221), then negative dramaturgies merely refer to the collective noun under which a dramaturgy of sabotage can exist, and that is exemplified by the potentiality that seemingly destructive processes emit.

As dramaturgy keeps finding new footholds in dance, new working processes are in constant development between dramaturgs and dancemakers. Often, and inadvertently, I seem to conflate dramaturgy with phenomenology, with the process of learning and with the development of pedagogy. If we were to define dramaturgy by way of Katherine Profeta, author of *Dramaturgy in Motion: at work on dance and movement performance* (2015), as "a quality of motion, which oscillates, claiming an indeterminate zone between theory and practice, inside and outside, word and movement, question and answer" (Profeta, 2015:xvii) [11] and phenomenology, by way of Sara Ahmed, as a mode that quite simply "asks us to be aware of the 'what' that is 'around'" (Ahmed, 2006:545), then my instincts around how to approach the difficult ephemera of dance centre around an idea of how to be in, and with, the work. When I step into a studio as a dramaturg I aim to approach the work in a similar way as when I step into the studio as a student: with a willingness to learn, analyse and embody the work of the artist from a place of curiosity and integrity. I attempt to build connections between disparate ideas, synthesize contrasting experiences on a molecular level, and then

[11] Profeta's influence on my work is palpable. Although her book, mentioned here, speaks to the work of a dramaturg in the field of dance in general, many of her personal methodologies, acknowledgements and perspectives can be reframed as negative dramaturgies (as my work will show). This indicated to me that there is a natural connection between dance dramaturgy and negative dramaturgy –both concern themselves with the "embodiment of something that is missing" (Profeta, 2015:12). In fact, Profeta denies that the role of the dramaturg in the danceroom is even necessary (Profeta, 2015:11). *Dramaturgy in Motion: at work on dance and movement performance* in some ways served as my reference bible throughout the writing of this dissertation as I checked and rechecked my ideas in comparison to Profeta's. Ironically, Profeta failed to embody what is missing in the context of this dissertation, and instead, embodied what was already there.

somehow, working from the inside-out, materialise impulse into a surface-level sensation, beyond the negative space surrounding the body, and into the viscera of others.

Therefore, as a starting point for my investigation of negative dramaturgies, I have drawn firstly from personal experience as a student confronted with a pedagogy of dissent, the uncomfortable effect of which first indicated to me the burgeoning potentiality of a negative theology in a creative process. Furthermore, I have supported my instincts about this kind of pedagogy by showing parallel histories of similar methodologies that have been implemented, codified and subsequently acclaimed by students of theatre worldwide. Training techniques, theatrical exercises and any sort of rehearsal strategy towards a performative event employ a dramaturgical approach as they function as an amalgamation between concept and materiality, "question and answer" (in Profeta's words) and thought and action for the facilitator/director/choreographer's process of making. How we collaborate in the studio under the auspices of these working practices requires a pedagogical choice between positive affirmation, a *via negativa*, or a gentle bridging of both. Negative dramaturgies shy away from over-productivity and skill-building and point toward a "process of elimination" (Grotowski, 1968:101) or a "deviation from the possible" (Cvejić, 2010) in the theatre- or dance-making process.

Chapter Three: Mythology of Productive Negation

> Ours then is a *via negativa* - not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks (Grotowski, 1968:17).

As it happens, the trouble started on the dancefloor. This one was as yet unfamiliar to me, both geographically and by reputation, but I found myself there, a couple of days before New Year's Eve of 2016, at experimental performance space OT301 in Amsterdam for Katie Duck's annual three-day improvised performance winter workshop. Duck, now in her sixties, sports an extensive international teaching and performance résumé, starting her career in the US in the 1970s, before moving to Italy to work with Dario Fo soon after, then taking up teaching positions in England before finally settling in Holland by the late 90s ("Bio", 2017). Duck is internationally renowned for her *Music Theatre* workshops, where she brings together dancers, musicians, actors and poets for hours-long sessions of simultaneous free improvisation (Smith, 2017). The day usually starts with an informal lecture from Duck where she will set up the session's focus and then later facilitate a period of physical research concerning the topic-at-hand. The last half of the day is set aside for the performance practice: microphones are set up in the space to weave intermittent spoken-word spells through the sound- and movementscapes that are created by the participants as they traverse each other's disciplines. Although there are strict rules in place for the non-musicians to control their impulses to pick up an instrument that does not belong to them, it has happened that the improvisational performance reached such feverish peaks that the reality of the fragility of the instruments was unfortunately forgotten.

My first notes, taken during the first day of the three-day workshop, reflect my general note-taking strategy of initially transcribing what is said word-for-word. They all start with a negative directive:

> *Don't chase the music. Don't be concerned with neatness. Feelings don't guide you well in space. Internal gaze is not good. Quit trying to feel the music. Don't*

> *"watch" … "see". Bring your feelings with you but don't use them. It's delusional to think you are ever out of the performance.*

The hyperbolic urgency with which these directives were delivered immediately stir in me as I revisit these notes. It reminds me of a story someone recently told me about how the late Jacques Lecoq, founder of the famed Parisian movement-theatre school, directed his students to "make him laugh" as their first foray into clowning.

> One-by-one they went on stage, performing their hearts out, and one-by-one they were met with deafening silence. When they realised what a failure their comedic attempts were, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. It was at that point, as they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters that they had been trying to show us, but at the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see (Lecoq, 2000:154).

Similarly, participation in the improvisational sessions that Duck facilitated soared on the first day with everyone generously engaging in her conceptual scores, yet on the third (and last) day the dance floor was mostly occupied by a few brave soloists that have longstanding relationships with Duck. During the course of the workshop her uncompromising approach to teaching manifested itself in moments of intense and public individual feedback delivered feverishly to 'offending' performers whom she had physically removed from the dance floor mid-performance. Some dancers never made it past three minutes of improvisation before being hauled off stage, resulting in a retreat to a position of terrified observation by the rest of us. We were not courageous enough to risk a creative decision that might lead to a humiliating removal from the performance space, and a pervasive sense of self-doubt filled the room.

Even though Duck's improvisational ideology –marked by the absence of the performer (exiting), waiting for change instead of creating change (pause), and observation (flow) – scared us into passivity during the workshop, in an improvised performance with long-time collaborator Julyen Hamilton some weeks later, Duck's impulses of negation provided a surprisingly productive dimension to the choreographic choices made by the two

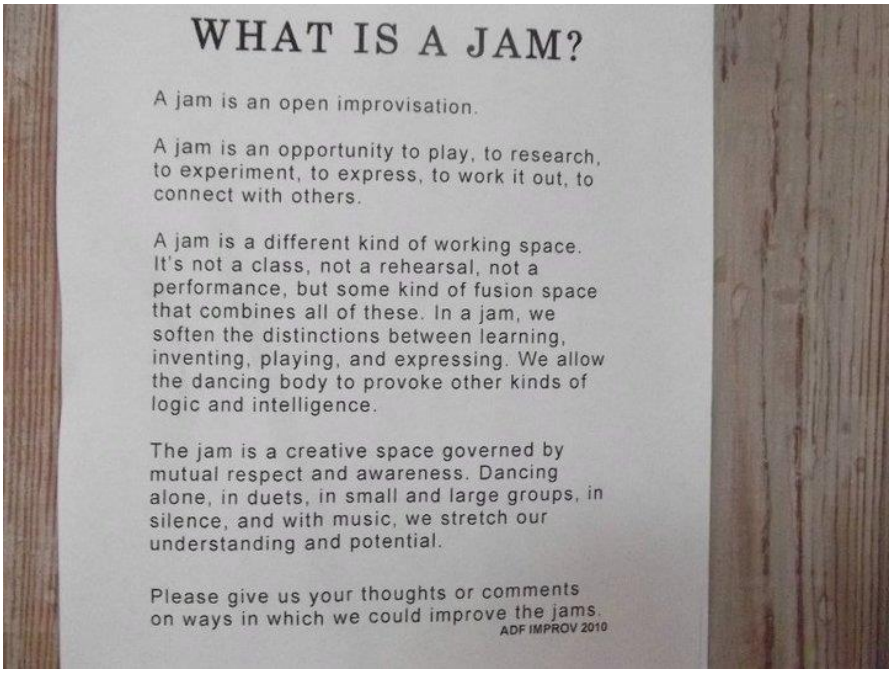
performers. When he flowed, she paused. When he paused, she exited. They talked over each other, to each other, about each other. She blocked and questioned. The viewer teetered on unfulfilled expectation and satisfying physical conclusions. Contrary to the widely-accepted 'Yes and...' rule developed for theatrical comedic improvisational performers (Improv Encyclopaedia, 2001), Duck's 'No, but...' approach created new and exciting possibilities in this performance. It was clear to me how Duck's *via negativa* had stunted possibilities of creative production in the rehearsal room as a teacher, yet produced stirring possibilities on stage as a performer.

I left the workshop angry and confused, and spent the next couple of weeks thinking and writing about my experience. Even though I would characterize my time during the workshop as essentially non-productive in that my willingness to participate in the activities was stunted due to fear of humiliation, my intellectual interest was sparked by noticing that those who were able to thrive in Duck's environment created gripping and evocative improvisational scores, including Duck herself, as could be seen during the duet with Hamilton some weeks later. I was reminded of Maaike Bleeker's words in the definitive essay, *Thinking No One's Thought*: "The first is an awareness of the emerging potential of that which is being created. It involves an understanding of the directions in which the creation could potentially proceed that is based on the dramaturg's familiarity with creative processes and ways of structuring work, both historic and contemporary" (Bleeker, 2015:145). I sensed this productive, creative potentiality amid the destructive delivery of Duck's methodology, and decided to investigate.

In my fifteen years of practicing improvisational dance, both contact and solo forms, I have learned (and deeply felt) that the improvisational dance floor is a space for experimentation, raw impulse and a vulnerable openness for creative response. Rules, or considered directions, are paramount in the creation and performance of an improvisational

work, since the success of these events rely heavily on an utter suspension of disbelief in psycho-physical limitations on the part of the participants, a suspension that might lead to acting outside of expected social or ethical boundaries precisely because of this ability to access uninhibited spontaneity.

Facilitators of improvised performance –and especially of contact improvisation (CI) – traditionally aim to promote a danger-free environment to bolster the physical and creative risk that each participant is striving to access by employing a there-is-no-wrong-answer credo, coupled with unconditional positive reinforcement and a new-age, we-are-one philosophy. Introduced as a specific type of movement practice in the 1970s by Steve Paxton, one of the founding members of the rebellious New York dance collective known as the Judson Dance Theatre, and later developed in cahoots with Nancy Stark Smith (who spearheaded the publication *Contact Quarterly* and still functions as its editor-in-chief), CI generally embodies the radical acceptance of participants with differing backgrounds, physicalities and abilities (Hennessy, 2008). In Paxton's writings about the practice, he emphasizes harmony and cooperation (Paxton, 1975:40-41). Stark Smith, in many interviews and writings, centres her pedagogical beliefs around human connection and trust (Erdur, 2016; Roberts, 1998; Stark Smith, 1987; Stark Smith 2002). These ideological precepts are especially common at a CI "jam" where, since the goal is often to explore purely somatic objectives, facilitators are aware that dancers are bringing more to the dance floor than mere aesthetic impulse.



Sign posted at the American Dance Festival ARK space in 2010, written by Ishmael Houston-Jones and Keith Hennessy. Image posted by Houston-Jones on his personal Facebook profile, August 27th, 2010.

These are the environments in which I learned CI, even though I became aware of a sort of rift in the teaching pedagogy and certain approaches to the professional performance of this form in 2009, when I took class with Ishmael Houston-Jones at Sarah Lawrence College. Almost a decade before meeting Katie Duck, Houston-Jones first introduced me to an alternative approach to dance improvisation where finding a point of disagreement is more creatively provocative than merely going-with-the-flow.

A controversial figure in the New York CI community, Houston-Jones facilitated his classes with care and I never felt unsafe, even though he pushed our emotional and physical limits by introducing performative exercises built on the precepts of "unsafe" improvisational prompts like blindness (we had to close our eyes and orient ourselves in the space for long stretches of time), pain (we slapped each other through the face over and over again), identity politics (we had to choose one of two groups that were constantly being redefined by race, sex and gender binaries, to name but a few) and extreme virtuosity or passivity. Houston-Jones taught class in street clothes and sneakers, breaking one of the fundamental rules of Paxton's CI, which advocates for the removal of any items that might unintentionally cause harm. Houston-Jones's explicit violation of Paxton's rules came to a head in 1983, when he,

together with collaborator Fred Holland, wrote a manifesto as part of *Untitled Duet* or *Oo-Ga-La*, though at the time they decided to keep it as the score for the work, unseen by the audience.

Image attributed to Ishmael Houston-Jones, posted on his personal Facebook profile on January 12th, 2017.

33 years later, as part of an exhibition at The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Houston-Jones presented the original manifesto alongside a new annotated version:

> *We are Black.*
>
> *(The earliest iteration of Contact Improvisation was Magnesium, a dance performance created by Steve Paxton, first done at Oberlin College in 1973. Contact Improvisation remained in 1983 and remains still a dance form done largely by people who are liberal arts educated and are not Black.)*
>
> *We will wear street clothes.*
>
> *(Contactors most often wore baggy, soft sweats with little attention paid to style.)*
>
> *We will wear heavy boots.*

> *(Contact was always performed in bare feet and Fred and I were very punk rock; I wore combat boots and Fred wore construction worker boots. We used to be chastised for wearing boots at contact jams.)*
>
> *We will play a loud, abrasive sound score.*
>
> *(Early contact was rarely done to any music and if so it was of the gentle ambient variety. We used a tape given us by a noise composer, Mark Allen Larson, which he made with samples from Kung Fu movies.)*
>
> *We will have non-performative conversations.*
>
> *(We talked about anything we wanted, sometimes referring to the dance we were performing and at other times just everyday chit-chat, but neither were projected to the audience.)*
>
> *We will fuck with flow.*
>
> *(In ten years, a classicism had attached itself to C.I. that dictated that movements "should" always be soft, flowing and sequential.)*
>
> *We will stay out of physical contact as much as possible.*
>
> *(As the name of the form implies, this was an important rule to break).*
>
> (Houston-Jones, 2016, quoted in Brick, 2017)

Houston-Jones's rebellion could be seen as negative dramaturgy in that he rejected traditional CI processes in the studio and on the stage in lieu of psychologically and physically risky approaches to the movement which resulted in daring creative solutions that challenged the confines of CI and propelled his work into an uncategorizable genre. Through his own *via negativa* he created a new improvisational potentiality that deliberately worked against widely accepted tenets of CI, and without the "classicism" mentioned in his annotated manifesto. This rift between pedagogy and performance, as previously mentioned, appears when negative dramaturgies are excavated in the presence of mutual trust, rather than in hostile environments. Houston-Jones's ability to create trusting relationships with his students even though he challenges conventional approaches to improvisational performance serves as an example of how negative pedagogy is not a requirement for negative dramaturgy.

Negative pedagogies can feed negative dramaturgies, nonetheless, as is the case with Duck. Though, personally, I find difficulty in resonating with her methodology, there are many people who hold her in great reverence. When reading through Houston-Jones's manifesto, I see many similarities with Duck's approach: she wears street clothes and shoes during class and performances, she promotes "loud and abrasive" music, sound scores or speaking during performances, she "fucks with flow" and she discourages contact between dancers, if at all avoidable. As with Houston-Jones's performances, Duck's negative dramaturgy persists in the (mostly psychologically) unsafe environments that she creates, and results in gripping and vibrant performative instances.

Duck's belief in an "exploitation of errors" by interruption (Grotowski, 1968:170) mirrors another famous training methodology of one of Lecoq's contemporaries, the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski. In Grotowski's 1968 book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Franz Marijnen describes the relationship between Grotowski and his students as a "tiger attacking his prey" (Grotowski, 1968:145). In my notes, taken on August 7th, 2017 during Duck's improvisational summer school in Amsterdam (eight months after the initial winter workshop), I jotted down Duck's words "*Because I threatened you, the whole thing lifted"*, in reference to an interaction she had with a student during an improvisational performance. This type of attack, Grotowski argues, elicits a primal response in the student that serves to essentialize their creative impulse beyond the demands of "human civility" (Grotowski, 1968:214). It is Grotowski's belief that true creativity can only occur in a space devoid of comfort or agreement. His *via negativa* then, lies in the excavation of pure impulse through a resignation of knowing "what not to do" (Grotowski, 1968:17; 175). Duck's often repeated negative directives exemplifies this belief:

> *Don't stop the action when things get uncomfortable. The performers need to problem-solve. Wait in the moment of deterioration. Don't try to save the mess.*

These directives are potent and have greatly informed my thinking in the development of my own *via negativa, Productive Negation,* which will be discussed in the following section.

At the time I didn't make the connection between Lecoq and Grotowski's *via negativas* and Duck's teachings, and though Duck is in no way explicit about the negative directive of her approach, it strongly echoes Lecoq's philosophy of "stripping away learned behaviour patterns" (Lecoq, 2000:27) and Grotowski's "process of elimination" (Grotowski, 1969:101). The learned behaviour patterns that Duck aims to strip away is attributed to the dancers' overreliance on codified technique, like ballet, or in Duck's words "a kind of 'hired in' teacher mimicry" (Duck, date unknown). I have heard her shout across a dancefloor more than once that she hates dancers because all we do is regurgitate other people's choreography in improvised performance. These realisations greatly influenced my thoughts and my inclusion of the idea of *deskilling*[12] in the invention of the third step in the process of *Productive Negation*, which I will discuss in detail in the following chapter.

> Ours is not a deductive method of collecting skills. Here everything is concentrated on the "ripening" of the actor which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bear of one's own intimity - all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment. (Grotowski, 1968:16)

In contrast to contact improvisation, where the goal is often to approach every movement somatically – that is to say, without the idea of an audience in mind – Lecoq and Duck both frame their versions of authenticity in terms of dramatic or performative effect. Nancy Stark Smith wrote in an editor's note to *Contact Quarterly* in the Spring/Summer of 1987 that "when Katie Duck teaches improvisation…she often tells people not to use their first impulse, but instead to wait for the second or third before taking action" (Stark Smith, 1987:3). Lecoq

[12] "Deskilling", a Marxist term recently resurfacing in artistic fields by way of John Roberts' 2008 and 2009 lectures, and his 2010 article in Historical Materialism (*Art after Deskilling)*, is originally a theory surrounding artistic division of labour where the "artist adopts a conceptualising role, directing the labour and technical accomplishments of others, without actually directly manipulating any materials [themselves]" (Roberts, 2010:84). Claire Bishop, a year later in The Brooklyn Rail, explains that "de-skilling denotes the conscious rejection of one's disciplinary training and its traditional competences" (Bishop, 2011).

explains that "the longer the interval between action and reaction, the greater will be the dramatic intensity, and the more powerful will be the dramatic performance" (Lecoq, 2000:35).

Just as Lecoq championed innocence and sensitivity in his clowns by demanding that "[they] allow [themselves] to be surprised by [their] own weaknesses" (Lecoq, 2000:155), Duck speaks of accessing vulnerability and the possibility of humiliation as the starting action for any new improvisational gesture. Both practitioners, though, see the ability to embody these states as performative tools rather than as psychological explorations. For those of us stepping into this technique for the first time, it is a difficult distinction to make.

Last summer in a dance studio at CounterPulse in San Francisco's Tenderloin District, I snapped a picture with my phone of a make-shift poster on the wall with the following guidelines for their weekly improv jam:

> *Bring your own safety.*
> *Don't get in the way of other folks' safety.*
> *If you can make it more pleasant, interesting, wonderful –do it.*
> *Trust that the other folks are doing the same.*
> *Know your relation to the ground.*
> *Technique matters.*
> *Support is not an obligation.*
> *Be generous with information, but keep a beginner's mind.*

Bring your own safety is the fundamental principal in contemporary CI practice and is widely accepted and taught. Another version of this rule is *take responsibility for your own safety* (Parker & Imre, 2014:4; contactimprovboston.com, n.d.; Boulder Contac Lab, 2018:1). Based on my experience the general assumption is that as participants in an improvisational jam we must trust ourselves to enforce the parameters of our own boundaries. In the summer of 2017 I signed up to attend two weeks out of Duck's six-week summer course, spurred on by my desire to dig deeper into this research. After four days, due to an escalation of differences in opinion between Duck and I, I decided to leave the workshop. I had brought my own safety, and when that didn't suffice, I chose to leave. Duck's practice of negation in that particular

environment felt like she was *getting in the way of my safety* and this obstructed the type of creative play that she set out to ignite. There were too many *don'ts*, it was too easy to fail, and I had not been given a chance to trust her, or even the other participants. The surprising successful use of these tactics during performance, however, suggests to me that her *via negativa* holds potential within its claws. The experience of the winter and summer workshops with Duck prompted me to further explore theories of negation as negative dramaturgies, and to ultimately synthesize these concepts into a new practice, a method through which to access negative directives productively. Discussed in detail in the following chapter, and as mentioned previously, I have preliminarily named this process *Productive Negation.*

Chapter Four: *Productive Negation*[13]

Critique of The Critical Response Process

In the wake of my experience at Katie Duck's winter and summer workshops, I set out to create my own dramaturgical strategy based on what I perceived as a negative theology of performance-making. Taking my personal process into account, primarily based on Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP) (Lerman & Borstel, 2003), I started to "lay-bear my own intimity" (Grotowski, 1968:16) and strip down the CRP to see how it would function in relative inversion, in analysis of how the positive productive aspects of the technique fail to serve its subjects.

It was at Sarah Lawrence College that I learned to implement Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process in my approach to dance-making. The process, which Lerman believes can be applied to any creative endeavour (not just to dance-making) divides the participants into three roles: The Artist, the Responders and the Facilitator. The actual work comes in the form of four steps, to be followed in succession. I will be examining these steps in greater detail in the next section, but briefly stated, the participants are led through a series of questions, directed to the Artist by the Facilitator, directed by the Artist to the Responders and directed by the Responders to the Artist (this constitutes both Steps Three and Four in the CRP) (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:10-22).

My focus on the CRP and my subsequent impulse to dismantle the process simply occurred because it is a feedback structure that is the most familiar to me as a dance-maker of

[13] A note on the use of italics for *Productive Negation*. As *Productive Negation* is an invention of my own making, my aim with the use of italics for the word during the course of this dissertation is to show a leaning-forwards, a sense of movement, that underscores the precarity of a work-in-progress. In contrast with the use of italics in the phrase *via negativa*, which denotes a specific concept in Latin not regularly in use and in the context of this paper used outside of a quoted reference, the italics in *Productive Negation* merely serve as a reminder of the possibility of a future evolution of terms.

a specific socio-economic and educational background, since it is taught mainly at the university level in institutions with enough economic substructure to offer degree programmes in dance. By the time I heard about the CRP for the first time, while doing my undergraduate degree in dance at Beloit College in Wisconsin between 2000-2004, the process was already more than a decade in the making (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:6). At Beloit, if memory serves, my knowledge of it was merely a part of a handout in one of my composition classes and never implemented as a focused working practice. Today the CRP is in effect world-wide in academic and private arts institutions, and a quick search on the internet will show that at this moment in time, in the summer of 2018, workshops on the process are taking place across the US, in the Netherlands, Italy, Scotland and England[14].

At Sarah Lawrence College, where I did my Masters in Dance five years later, the CRP provided the structural framework for Dance Making, a class that was at the heart of the curriculum for both BA and MFA dance students. Under the guidance of Sara Rudner, a celebrated dancer who was the head of the dance programme at the time, and Dan Hurlin, an award-winning theatre-maker who served as faculty in both the dance and theatre departments, the entire dance school would come together once a week to show each other curated snippets from our personal rehearsals. During these rehearsals we worked towards the end-of-semester, professionally produced concerts in the campus's Bessie Schönberg Theatre. During these sessions, in our allotted timeslots of about 10-15 minutes for each choreographer, we had to both perform and leave enough time for feedback. The feedback session always started with a question from the choreographers themselves, and the rest of us had to be careful not to respond to anything but the question at hand, resisting the impulse to

[14] On the day I searched I found CRP training workshops at The Dance Exchange in Maryland (Dance Exchange, n.d.), at Alternate Roots in Georgia (Borstel, 2017), at Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht, in the Netherlands (Musework, n.d.), at Communicating Dance European Project in Italy (Borga, 2015), at Puppet Animation Scotland (Federation of Scottish Theatre, n.d.) and at the Innovative Conservatoire at the Guildhall School for Music and Drama in London, which specifically trains artists from Europe and Australia (Innovative Conservatoire, n.d.).

bombard the choreographer with random opinions. After each week's session Sara Rudner and Dan Hurlin would set up individual meetings with the choreographers to discuss the work and the feedback received. While reaping enormous benefit from this system as a whole, the CRP's insistence on the choreographer as the centrifugal force in the dance-making process eventually outlived its usefulness in my practice as I questioned the method's assumption of the efficacy of the traditional artist-collaborator hierarchy. By the end of my final year at Sarah Lawrence College I was trying to find ways to outsmart the CRP in order to shift the attention away from myself and toward a more democratic, collaborative effort. The impetus for this section therefore comes from a feeling of discontent in my working practice with the CRP, over the last nine years as a choreographer in the studio making my own work, and most recently as a dramaturg in collaboration with, and as witness to, other choreographers' dance-making processes.

Lerman's need to codify how she received feedback was borne out of discontent too, as she was unsatisfied with the responses to her work after showings or performances at the time of her professional emergence in the late 1970s and found them psychologically damaging (2003:6). Her reaction was to develop a four-step programme as a system of "gentle" questioning where she was able to paraphrase concerns about her own work, or the work of others, from harsh opinion to 'civilized' inquiry. She found that the technique led to encounters with "no defensive resistance" (2003:7) as she shifted the power-dynamic from the audience to the artist, giving the artist control over how feedback is delivered.

In a conversation with me at the Women in Dance Leadership conference[15] at Tisch School of the Arts in New York where Lerman was the keynote speaker, she admitted that there has been a desire to recontextualize the CRP to reflect the current socio-political atmosphere in dance-making, and to collect examples of feedback practices based on the CRP

[15] January 18 -20, 2018

that in some way evolve the process. This indicated to me an awareness of the 20 years that have passed since its original implementation, and an acknowledgement of the specific historicity of the system's value. This historicity might refer to the inherent privilege of the process's working conditions (funding, space and opportunity to create and perform work, as well as educational and personal support structures), which can no longer be taken for granted in the current socio-political context of the importance of equity over equality. It also affirmed my sense of the process as being too cosmetic, too careful in its approach, superannuated in its assumption of the artist as a singularly defined entity in the creative process and too easily shaped to create a safe environment.

And yet, it is outside the protection of the safety of carefully monitored feedback that Lerman was inspired to create the CRP in the first place. Ironically then, the space that Lerman attempts to create with the implantation of the CRP, a space of "no defensive resistance" (as previously mentioned), found life *because* she felt uncomfortable, because she was unsatisfied, because she experienced the environment in which feedback occurs as psychologically unsafe. Arguably, her most creative impulse would never have thrived in the presence of the type of safe spaces she promotes with the development of the CRP. As artists we often find that "the most interesting dialogue and discoveries be located on the far side of some sort of discomfort" (Profeta, 2015:202), towards a place of risk. I therefore urge, in my critique of CRP, towards an interrogation of safe spaces, and "safe space language", as used by Jackie Wang in *Against Innocence: Race, Gender and the Politics of Safety* (2014). Wang asserts that "prioritizing personal comfort is unproductive, reformist, and can bring the energy and momentum of bodies in motion to a standstill". She goes on to say that "the politics of innocence and the politics of safety and comfort are related in that both strategies reinforce passivity" (Wang, 2012:20). There are echoes here of Duck's disregard of the psychological safety of whoever is in the studio with her, though I speculate that this extreme example

would only be deliberately productive if Duck orchestrated the tension in the space with specific awareness of its creative potential. That being said, my experience there hinted at the stale environments that overly safe spaces foster, and, in general, political shortcomings in terms of who safe space is for. On another level, the dance floor is tricky to navigate in this manner as it functions as a bridge between personal and professional and can never be totally safe because of the vulnerable intimacy that dancers are often required to bring to their work. I am reminded of Gloria Anzaldúa's introduction to *this bridge we call home* (2002) where she writes: "There are no safe spaces. 'Home' can be unsafe and dangerous because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. […] To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded" (Anzaldúa, 2002:3). Just as we *bring our own safety* to CI jams, we need to also bring our own safety to the CRP and can therefore afford to untangle the CRP's built-in psychological safety net. Furthermore, inasmuch as the CRP opens up the channels of communication between artist and audience, it obscures a gut-instinct honesty in conversation about the work by privileging the artist's opinion or intention and positioning the response of the audience-as-collaborator as disposable. The Artist can decide to ignore Responder reactions that evoke unease.

I am aware that the CRP continues to find resonance in educational contexts today, and I do not wish to undervalue its long overdue reaction against abusive, authoritarian dance pedagogies. But the cautiousness and safety of the CRP method and it's assumption of certain privilege combined with an arguably outdated perception of choreographers as stand-alone entities, indicate a need for a reconfiguration of the CRP to include brazen honesty (and the ability to take responsibility for our own psychologies), a re-evaluation of the Artist's "right to comfort" (Okun, 2011:7), as well as a disruption of the hierarchy of the Artist with the concurrent acquiescence of the intrinsically collaborative nature of dance-making.

My aim with the following section is to introduce my counter-response to the CRP - *Productive Negation* - in the form of manifesto, process of discovery/sources of inspiration, a new work-in-progress-methodology and a field test of this methodology during a series of workshops taught in the US in the summer of 2017.

Manifesto

Productive Negation disrupts inert artistic methodology.

Productive Negation is noisy and baiting.

Productive Negation reveres the problem.

Productive Negation questions the visible on the condition of the invisible.

Productive Negation obstructs dependency on answers.

Productive Negation listens to the fortuitous silences.

Productive Negation contests emotional gratification.

Theoretical Working Model of Productive Negation

Rooted in my questioning of the CRP, along with the practical and theoretical encounters that I have addressed up to this point, I am attempting to develop a dramaturgical methodology that combines aspects of Grotowski and Lecoq's *via negativas*, negative theology and the dramaturgical practices of Bojana Cvejić and Katherine Profeta.

As we have seen in the previous section, and as I will attempt to show with the model of *Productive Negation*, verbal and symbolic acts of negation in the process of theatre-making creates a space for intensive development in the production's progress. Since 2016 my goal has been to create a collaborative feedback system that embraces the potential for failure, flourishes in the problematic and questions excessive harmony – a process that uses the negative as an end to a productive means. I therefore propose *Productive Negation* as a

hermeneutical apparatus, in direct response to Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, with the ambition that it be used by dramaturgs, dance educators in collaborative environments, and by performers with an interest in self-dramaturgy. The development of *Productive Negation* as both a method of creative evocation and a feedback system is an attempt to answer my initial research question: How do we productively say *no* to each other in the process of dance- and theatre-making?

For the purposes of developing the theoretical framework for the practical exploration of *Productive Negation*, I am invoking the following definition:

> *Productive Negation* is a 'critical making' process that promotes a renegotiation of the principles of invention through collaborative, linguistic feedback practices rooted in theories of negation.

Here I've borrowed the term 'critical making', coined by the Canadian technology theorist Matt Ratto, as a way to emphasize the collaborative aspects of *Productive Negation* as a methodology, to underline an engagement with scholarly texts in the context of a physical practice, and to privilege process over product (Ratto, 2011:252-253). In Ratto's words: "…My goal is to make concepts more apprehendable, to bring them in ways to the body, not only the brain, and to leverage student and researcher's personal experiences to make new connections between the lived space of the body and the conceptual space of scholarly knowledge" (2011:254). These critical making characteristics, combined with the renegotiation of the principles of invention – in this case based on the CRP though it can be any personal or codified compositional procedure – focus the generative aspects of the dance-making process in on itself. The turning-in-on-itself thus evokes a dramaturgical phenomenology demanding an analytical awareness of the decisions being made in the creation of the new work.

Productive Negation emerges through an inventiveness embedded in theories of negation, that is to say, in environments that promote emotional and conceptual risk through

the elimination of positive reinforcement, the addition of intensive questioning and the interruption of habit. In response to the CRP's emphasis on the artist as the sole proprietor of the work, I have instead positioned the artist as one part of a collaborative whole in an attempt to reflect a more commonplace experience of the cooperative nature of the dance-making process.

The implementation of *Productive Negation* lives in open, clear conversation between the artist, the dramaturg (or any non-dancing person brought into the rehearsal space with a clear intention of engaging with the work) and the performers involved. As the CRP champions the Artist, the Facilitator and the Responders, in my example I have positioned the Artist as the artist, the Facilitator as the dramaturg, and the Responders as the other collaborators involved in the project, be they dancers, set or sound designers, singers, etc. In my application of *Productive Negation* in the four-day workshops I taught in the summer of 2017 at CounterPulse in San Francisco and Brooklyn Studio for Dance in Brooklyn, New York (with a one-day version at OuterSpace in Chicago), I occupied the role of dramaturg-as-observer, making a distinction between a linguistic feedback practice and a movement-based feedback practice. In other words, I kept my body off the dancefloor as a way to limit any aesthetic influence I might have on the personal movement impulses of the participants in the workshop, because, frankly, my personal aesthetic register is entirely beside the point, and since I was also facilitating the workshop I did not want to blur the participants' personal artistic proclivities.

My aim in proposing the use of *Productive Negation* in the rehearsal room, perhaps in lieu of the CRP, is to access "the force of not knowing" (Lepecki, 2011:192) (instead of knowing what you would want or not want to hear), of a stripping down of the individual knowledge of 'what works' in each participant's choreographic archive (instead of a

reinforcement) to a place of invention that "deviates from the possible" (Cvejić, 2010) (instead of solving the problem of the impossible).

The workshops form the empirical component of my research concerning the practical parameters of *Productive Negation*. In the next sections I have included my statement of intent, followed by the theoretical underpinnings and development of each step. Each step's 'field notes' contain anecdote and reflections of the applied theory in the practical, workshop environment of the dance studio, where I worked and re-worked strategies and failures as the process evolved. I conclude self-evaluatively, pondering future iterations of *Productive Negation*'s continued potential.

Statement of Intent for the workshops

In this workshop I guided experienced dancers through a compositional dance process that aims to strengthen collaborative work while maintaining individuality and personal conviction. Positive reinforcement methodologies were set aside to employ a productive critical thinking initiative where questioning took precedence over answering. The Critical Response Process was adapted to reflect a new dramaturgical approach that places emphasis on the dynamic intricacies between the dancemaker and their collaborators. Participants were taught productive strategies of how, when and why to say "no", both in their own creative processes and in the creative processes of others. Participants were expected to engage both practically and theoretically with the materials provided. The expected outcome of the workshop was that the participants presented new works-in-progress in an informally curated and free public showing.

The Four Steps of Productive Negation and Field Notes

In an attempt to show the practical application of *Productive Negation*, I have expanded the Critical Response Process in a way that exemplifies my proposed model of dramaturgical analysis and conceptual/practical development. These steps are the tools through which to respectively access deskilling procedures, invoke the problematic and to create a path to the artist or collective's own *via negativa* in the rehearsal process and towards a specific performance of the work.

Throughout this section I refer to dance- and theatre-makers as artists or choreographers, to collaborators as dramaturgs and to dramaturgs as collaborators. I refer to the grouping of people working on the production as-a-whole as the collective. These terms are used interchangeably in order to emphasize the potential for personal adaptation and nuanced approach to the methodology, and to the constantly shifting definitions of roles for people working creatively on a performance, especially in situations of independent or low-budget productions where the privilege of formal titles cannot be afforded. The main difference between *Productive Negation* and the CRP is the context within which these

methods exist. The CRP is not specific about who the Responders need to be, and assumes that any feedback from anyone can be valuable. I do not contest this, but I desire a more curated environment for response in my own dance-making process. The potential of *Productive Negation* is thus more thoroughly unlocked when the audience for the showings is the immediate collective and other invited guests with direct connections to the artists involved. *Productive Negation* is a reoccurring, closed, process that thrives in situations where trust (or at least familiarity) is predetermined and implicit among those present. Idealistically, a community evolves around the creation of the work, relieving the artist of their role as sole originator of the work's trajectory.

In the presentation of my data I have first provided each step with its own theoretical context, followed by field notes which were taken during the workshops in the summer of 2017. The field notes encompass both the procedure of each day as well as my reflective responses. As the workshop spanned four days in San Francisco and Brooklyn respectively (in Chicago I presented a "crash course" in one evening), each step took up a whole day's work. In Brooklyn I was given the opportunity to organize a more formal showing of the work we accomplished during the week to an invited audience. My intention in including my field notes is to make explicit the practical methodology I employed in leading the participants through my ideas and motivations behind *Productive Negation*. Therefore, the core objective of this section in the context of this study is to show the process of this new compositional and dramaturgical methodology – exploring the practice of dance making within the constraints of its theoretical underpinnings, in collaboration with other bodies in a studio space[16].

[16] I am therefore not sure whether to classify this study as Practice as Research, Practice-based Research, Practice-led Research or Research as Praxis, as the academic outcome of this work exists only in this written form, though the workshops presented an opportunity to embody and trouble-shoot the theoretical and proposed methodology, formed the basis of the theoretical work I am proposing and manifested a performative product.

The idea for *Productive Negation* developed experientially at first, in the absence of tangible and deliberate academic theory. It evolved into a reading-based research project that supported and informed specific practical decisions made in the invention and generation of the method, followed by a month of empirical experimentation in dance studios with participants whose express interest was learning both the theory and application of *Productive Negation*. The final step was the amalgamation of the process into writing – the integration of both the practical and non-practical aspects of the process into a coherent theory. With this I wish to draw on Baz Kershaw's notion that "dwelling in the ambiguous space between binaries invites inventiveness" and that "intuitive messiness and aesthetic ambiguity are integral to researching theatre and performance, where relationships between the researcher and the researched are often fluid, improvised and responsive" (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011:2). My hope is that anyone would be able to use this procedure as a point of departure for personal and collaborative creative exploration and that they will evolve and adapt it in accordance to their own needs, just as we as dancemakers have done with the CRP for twenty years.

1. Negation: What questions have not been answered?
2. Questioning: Have you questioned your own question?
3. Deskilling/Reskilling: How can you ask your question in a different way?
4. Strategy: What further questions do you have?

Step One: Negation: What questions have not been answered?

The first step in the process of *Productive Negation* comes after the initial rehearsal period of conceptualization and movement generation both in and out of the studio. A good time to start this process would be after the collaborators have been assembled, preliminary ideas have

been discussed and first attempts at stringing together sequences of choreography have been achieved. In tandem with the CRP, step one takes the form of a feedback or brainstorming session after an informal showing of the work. The audience for the informal showing can be anyone whose opinion the choreographer/collective values, including the dramaturg (or other collaborators) who will witness the process from start to finish.

In Lerman's CRP this first step was originally named "Affirmation", but she soon realized that the Facilitator's inquiry into the positive aspects of the Responders' immediate reaction after seeing the work resulted in a coddling of the Artist, and not in an assessment of the work (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:18). Subsequently this step was renamed as "Statements of Meaning". Building on the premise that the Artist's singular goal is to find that "what they have just completed has significance to another human being" (2003:19), Lerman positions the Facilitator at the centre, mediating an opening discussion on interpretations of the "meaning" of the work by the Responders. Here the onus is on the audience (the Responders) to reflect "meaning" back to the artist "in a positive light" (2003:19). Though these inferences might help indicate to the Artist whether their intended concepts are clearly communicated, the Artist merely tracks what they already know, rather than creating an opportunity to excavate what they *don't* know, or what they might not have previously considered. The issue here is not only that "meaning" is elevated as the paramount expression of performative output, but also that the breadth of artistic sensibility is limited to one dimension. As the creation of methodologies in general are direct reflections of the creators of those methodologies' own interests, Lerman's assumptions about what makes art "good" is intrinsically tied to her interest in clear expression of meaning, while in my post-modern approach, meaning is secondary to dramaturgical coherence and conceptual manifestation, no matter how meaningless it may seem. In the ground-breaking text, *On Dramaturgy*, by

Marianne van Kerkhoven (1994), my sense of the irrelevance of "meaning" as a conceptual base is supported by what Van Kerkhoven calls a "new dramaturgy". She writes that:

> … in fact, this way of working is based on the conviction that the world and life do not offer up their 'meaning' just like that; perhaps they have no meaning, and the making of a play may then be considered as the quest for possible understanding. In this case dramaturgy is no longer a means of bringing out the structure of the meaning of the world in a play, but (a quest for) a provisional or possible arrangement which the artist imposes on those elements he gathers from a reality that appears to him chaotic. (Van Kerkhoven, 1994:18)

In the first step of *Productive Negation*, after the showing, I suggest that the collaborators evaluate the proximity of the artist or collective's specific intention or concept to its performative manifestation by explicating both what they saw in the work, and more importantly, what they did not see. Here I am not proposing dramaturgical concept-guarding as the centrifuge of the practice, but merely as a focused first step to a disentangling of artistic motivation and as a way for the collaborators to track their conceptual evolution. The focus for the dramaturg in this step is to hold an analytical framework in place that is more attuned to what is missing from the work based on the intention set by the artist, rather than what is readily visible. Simply put, by negating the importance of what the artist has already achieved, and instead bringing into focus what the work is lacking, a collective attention emerges towards the advancement of the work.

> No is unity, yes is multiplicity: one no, many yeses. The yeses are necessary and the multiplicity is desirable. To start with the no is not to deny the importance of the yeses, but to insist that they must be understood as being within a negative logic. It is the no that gives internal (rather than external) unity to the yeses. (Holloway, 2005: 266)

This experiential response together with the dramaturg's observations about the unfulfilled objectives of the work are weighed against the theoretical, pre-determined intention of the artist in order to continue the cross-examination of the original motivations. A working example of this is when Katherine Profeta (in her book, *Dramaturgy in Motion*) realizes that a part of her role as a dramaturg was to "destabilize" the artist, as when she noticed that Ralph

Lemon dwelled in comfortable improvised movement patterns during a rehearsal of *Tree* (2000) instead of his previously articulated intention of pushing past his habitual physical vocabulary (Profeta, 2015:17). In highlighting the ways in which Lemon failed his original intention, Profeta was able to reset the physical course of the work. Even though Lemon might have felt defeated in the moment, the realization of how his own habits obscured his goals was a necessary first step in admitting that he did not answer his own questions.

Field Notes:

> No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the antiheroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved (Rainer,1965:178).

In leading participants through *Negation*, I started with a conditioning exercise inspired by the postmodern choreographer, Yvonne Rainer, in which everyone had to write their own "No Manifestoes". Using Rainer's 1965 *No Manifesto* as a prototype (quoted above), I set out to recalibrate the participants' usual impulses from a positive productivity towards productive negativity. The dramaturgy of this exercise is invoked by asking the participants to engage with a historical text as an opening gesture into their dance-making practice, and to turn to the pen (and thus an imaginative environment), rather than to their physical bodies and the kneejerk urge to *just start moving*. This assignment also set the intellectual framework for the rest of the workshop: accessing creative desire by focusing on what they do not accept, either personally or creatively.

Next, I asked the participants to write a statement of intent for their generative work over the next four days, which takes the form of a solo piece of choreography for their own bodies. Whether or not the material generated during the workshop remains a solo, or is taken

and further developed in future rehearsals, remains their prerogative, though many participants came into the workshop with an idea for future work (and an opportunity to perform it) already in place. The statement of intent written on this first day does not remain intact, and each forthcoming step encourages a honing and clarification of this original statement.

After a period of warming-up, improvisation and working on a presentable phrase of movement, the participants underwent the process of reading their statements, showing their phrases of movement and engaging in feedback.

In San Francisco this went as follows:

1. A participant showed their phrase of movement to the rest of the group.
2. The group responded only with their observations on the physical characteristics of the work. For example, one participant placed herself on the centre line, in deliberate close proximity to the group as she performed. My response was thus an acknowledgement of her decision regarding her stage placement. Although seemingly obvious in this case, it indicated to the participant that her choice was noticeable to the audience – an affirmation of creative decision, as per Lerman's CRP. I included this step, in order to show the contrast in qualitative response between the CRP and a forthcoming step of responding to what had *not* been made obvious by the performer.
3. The participant read their statement of intent to the group.
4. The group then drew parallels between the phrase of movement presented, their initial affirmative responses, and the statement of intent. Collectively we were then able to gauge whether the movement phrase of the participant held up to their statement of intent by indicating what we *didn't see* in the movement phrase, but what the participant spoke about in their statement. The group could also respond to what they didn't see enough of, or what needs more information to more successfully connect

the statement to the movement phrase. In continuance with the previous example, the participant's statement of intent reflected a desire to comedically comment on her traditional folk dancing training, and the performative tropes that surround the specific technique. I was then able to share that her choice of proximity read as confrontational, rather than as playful, which was her original goal. The participant's reliance on the belief that her exaggerated proximity to the audience was enough to hint at her intended comedic tone resulted in a diminishing of other tonal indicators to the audience, and her attempt fell flat. What we saw was proximity, what we didn't see was the intended effect of her proximity.

In Brooklyn, a couple of weeks later, I expanded Step One by creating multiple opportunities for the participants to refine their statements of intent during the course of that first day, as I felt that, in San Francisco, the participants had started to hone their statements but weren't given an opportunity to officially reconsider them before their solo presentations. I also wanted to create more opportunities for collaboration, as the process still felt too singularly focused on the artist-as-sole-creator. Thus, after writing their "No Manifestoes" and initial statements of intent, the participants were given time to create movement phrases, after which we came together to share each of their original statements. The new process became:

1. A participant read their statement of intent to the group.
2. Each participant had to respond with a three-minute stream-of-consciousness, free-write about the statement they just heard.
3. Each participant shared their free-writes with the group based on the original statement. I included this step, in order for the participants to see how words can evoke different associations and different meanings based simply on who is in the room with them, and to experience a deepening of understanding of their own words

through collective group-think. In this way the author of the statement in question was exposed to the potential of Lepecki's "force of not knowing" (Lepecki, 2011:192) by destabilizing them as the sole "knower", even when it comes to their own set of intentions.

4. This was repeated until all the participants had read their statements and had listened to the responses to their statements.
5. Everyone re-wrote their original statements with the added prompts: *What haven't you considered? What aspect of your statement is yet to be physicalized in some way?* Based on what they had just physically accomplished they could then self-critique the evolution or discordances between the intellectual and physical manifestations of their statements.

After this intervention the participants were given more time to work on their movement phrases. This was followed by the feedback process established on the first day of the workshop in San Francisco, which ended in a showing of the phrases and a feedback session, though I eliminated the possibility for observational response and instead immediately skipped to talking about what was absent or underrepresented in their showings. Their resistant *noes* from their manifestoes at the start of the day became productive and powerful indicators of how a focus on the negative, on what is not there, can productively impact the evolution of the work.

Step Two: Questioning: Have you questioned your own question?

In Lerman's CRP, this step is known as "Artist as Questioner" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:19). As the original title suggests, this step positions the art-maker as the sole questioner, allowing the responders insight into what the artist is potentially wrestling with, as well as presenting them with an opportunity to answer the artist frankly and from a personal viewpoint. In fact, it

was Pina Bausch who first "dared to ask dancers a question" redistributing "the position of 'who detains the knowledge'" (Lepecki, 2001) in the rehearsal room, and thereby "effectively proposing a shift in the definition of a choreographer from someone who has all the answers to someone who poses generative questions" (Profeta, 2015:8). In the model of *Productive Negation* this idea is expanded by redistributing the position of the lone questioner to everyone else in the room.

In the CRP the Facilitator's job during this step is to guide the Artist's questions towards a place of specificity, but not to answer any of the questions posed (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:20). In the next step, "Neutral Questions from Responders", the rest of the group is allowed to reciprocate the Artist's questions with their own. Neutrality is at the heart of the CRP, and Lerman suggests that, at this point, the Responders should aim at transforming their opinions into *neutral* questions (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:21). Instead of saying 'I didn't like the gesture section', Lerman proposes a deeper analysis in the form of a question, for example: 'What was the context and motivation for the gesture section?' Lerman's insistence on neutrality veers the conversation towards a safe space rhetoric that protects the feelings of the Artist. She argues that "when defensiveness starts, the learning stops" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:21). It is therefore the responsibility of everyone else in the room to ensure that the Artist's need to defend their work, when faced with opinion, is circumvented.

In this second step of *Productive Negation* the aim is not to navigate away from the risk of opinion, but rather to learn how to transform opinion into "mobilizing questions" (Georgelou, Protopapa & Theodoridou, 2017:38-61). When the dancemaker asks a question, the dramaturg (for example) is able to reflect on their queries by responding with further questions that might highlight the concerns of the dancemaker, or that might break the original question down into more specific questions, instead of answering them outright (this

is in alignment with the CRP's second step, where the Facilitator is encouraged to not answer any of the questions themselves).

> The task was to reply not *to* the question but *with* a question, which required focusing on what is at stake in the question being asked and thinking through how this question could be further questioned and taken forward (Georgelou, Protopapa & Theodoridou, 2017:38).

When the group (including the dramaturg) is asked, hypothetically, "Did you like the gesture section?", a question-to-this-question might be: "What is it about the gesture section that prompts you to wonder about my feelings towards it?" Step Two of *Productive Negation* serves as a truncation of the CRPs second and third steps, but pushes the premise even further, as it initiates a cyclical questioning where the only acceptable answer is in the form of a question. It is therefore possible for the dancemaker (who always asks the first mobilizing question), the dramaturg and the performers to interrogate each other without having to account for immediate solutions. This also defuses the energy around the Artist as sole answerer and holds the group as-a-whole accountable for the psychological risk involved in exploring more and more detailed questions about the work. If anyone has the impulse to defend a creative choice that was made during the showing of the work, they can channel their defensiveness into a questioning of that which brought the feeling to surface in the first place. In this way the epistemology of the work of dancemaking is redistributed from the singularly authoritarian Artist as each collaborator "fends for themselves" (Wang, 2012). We also rely here on the aforementioned universal rule of contact improvisation: Bring Your Own Safety. Consequently, as an example, a follow-up question to "What is it about the gesture section that prompts you to wonder about my feelings towards it?" could then perhaps be: "Well, does the section seem out of place, since it is the only part of the piece that shows gesture?". A reply to this could be: "Why is it the only section that contains gesture?" which could be answered by saying "Does the piece as a whole need the gesture section?" etc. Regardless of the answer to this last question (which would not be made explicit during this step), there is

an indication to everyone in the room that there is doubt around the gesture section, and therefore more attention needs to be paid in contextualizing it, or in an extreme example, to eliminate it from the work.

Dramaturgically, procedural cognizance in the process of dancemaking includes both the ability to productively oppose in the rephrasing of questions, and to recognize conceptual clues in the questions of the artist that might encourage developmental potentiality.

> Stating a problem isn't about uncovering an already existing question or concern, something that was certain to emerge sooner or later, a problem is not a rhetorical question that can't be answered. On the contrary, to raise a problem implies constructing terms in which it will be stated, and conditions it will be solved in. (Cvejić, 2010)

Remembering that this is only the second step in a four-step process, the goal here is not to come up with immediate solutions to these questions, but to view them as mechanisms that will inform future decisions, whether by eliminating creative possibilities or by generating them.

Field Notes

> The problem lies within the idea itself, or rather, the idea exists only in the form of questions. (Cvejić, 2010)

Questioning, as the second step, forms the introduction to the last step in *Productive Negation*, called Strategy. In the explanation of Step Two I did not find it necessary to bring the theory behind Strategy into play yet, since I will be discussing this in detail later. During the workshop, though, it was important to start Day Two with the article that serves as the fundamental theoretical base for the final step, namely Bojana Cvejić's, *The Ignorant Dramaturg* (2010). I did this for two reasons. One: I wanted to immediately realign the participants' loyalties to the idea of "the problem" – as a "friend of the problem" (Cvejić, 2010) rather than as problem-solvers - since the premise of the day is based on not answering any questions, and not racing towards solution. Two: I did not want to spend the last day with

an intellectual discussion as the opening activity, since the theme of that day is Strategy, and therefore I wanted to spend the non-dancing time working with the participants to create their own personal dramaturgical strategies, rather than focusing on someone else's. In actuality, time constraints became a dominating factor in how I arranged the activities, rather than following the steps in their intended order.

After a collective work-through of *The Ignorant Dramaturg,* I gave the participants five minutes to do a reflective free-write about Cvejić's ideas surrounding the "methodology of problem" (Cvejić, 2010). From there they took to the dance floor to remind themselves of the material they generated in the previous day's session, after which we came together again to develop each participant's individual research question. Using their statements of intent from Step One, they had to rewrite their statements as a series of questions, as many as they needed to keep its original integrity. Whittling the many questions down to three questions only, they moved into the space in order to explore each of their three questions physically, through an embodiment of a sense of "not knowing" (Lepecki, 2011:192), in other words, with strict instructions not to attempt to *answer* their questions through a movement response. How they navigated a response that explicitly does not include a solution/answer was up to them, and as it is impossible to monitor or gauge success of a thought experiment (even when physicalized), I relied on the participants to impose their own cognitive, evaluative, binaries. After this exercise they had to return to their notebooks to formulate a cohesive research question that aligned with their statements of intent. A period of longer movement investigation following the final edits to their research question served to solidify the choreography that they had to present to the group at the end of the day. As with the previous day, each participant had a set amount of time to share their research question, to present their choreography in response to their research question, and to get feedback on what they had shared. The feedback was only allowed to be given in the form of questions, and if the

participant chose to react to any of the questions (they were under no obligation to respond and could choose to only listen and take notes), they too had to formulate their reactions as questions. Since it takes some time to get into the mindset of questioning a question, I prompted the participants with the following list to start their mobilizing questions: What...? How...? In what way...? I wonder whether/if...? Is it/there...? Do you/I.? When you were doing that, did you...? Are you questioning...? Are you wondering about...?

As an example, in New York one of my mentors, Peggy Gould (whom I met when I was a student and she an adjunct professor at Sarah Lawrence College), attended my workshop. Peggy's statement of intent from the first day expressed an interest in "locating centres of movement and connection within [her] body that hold a mythical or historical memory relating to [her] state of being on earth for the past six decades" (Gould, Personal communication, June 2016). During her showing at the end of the first day, we observed a quiet back-towards-the-audience privacy in the execution of her aesthetically bare choreography. What we didn't see was an overt exhibition of her body in space, which is why it was a surprise when her research question at the end of the second day was: "What liberation would be served by my claiming visibility based on accumulated and synthesized knowledge, experience and desire?" (Gould, Personal communication, June 2016) As a performer, Peggy felt a tension between the private sensation of aging and the instinct to be validated in first the locating of, and then the showing of, this sensation in a public sphere. More than that, Peggy realized that she was motivated by the assumption that visibility in performance would bring liberation, and therefore questioned not only her instinct as a performer, but also the kind of freedom that this visibility would bring. Questions that were posed to Peggy in her feedback session were: Why do we have the desire to actively show knowledgeability? Is freedom possible? and What assumptions am I making about my personal understanding of freedom in relation to the interpretation of freedom by others?.

This cycle of questioning illuminated not only Peggy's assumptions and interest, but also the rest of the group's, since we realized that what we saw in the work, what we chose to question and what we responded to, reflect our own preferences. Whereas the CRP is a great model for maintaining civility in the questioning of artistic intent, content and execution, *Productive Negation* incites a depth of clarification of these aspects not only to the dancemaker, but also to the rest of the collaborators by guiding the group, together, towards a place of investigation based on mutual investment in the work presented, and therefore mutual risk. With the redistribution of the epistemological responsibility in the room we were able to bring an awareness to the vulnerable process of creating in a way that sharpened our analytical skills through the practicing of questioning a question, as well as honing an interrogative spirit in our own work and the works of others.

Step Three: Deskilling/Reskilling: How can you ask your question in a different way?

As Step Two in the process of *Productive Negation* functions as an amalgamation of the CRP's second and third steps, I was able to bring to this procedure a tenet of my own invention that serves to address a missing element in the CRP (a practical stimulus) and an alternative strategy that exemplifies the ironic tension between productivity and obstruction, namely deskilling, and its counterpart, reskilling.

In *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (2015), dance dramaturg Katherine Profeta chronicles her working relationship with American choreographer Ralph Lemon. Throughout the book she shows how she used objections, questions and negations to incite Lemon's creativity. Profeta describes herself as "noisy" and her working method as "baiting" Lemon with an overwhelming abundance of what-ifs, hows and whys, most of which "were not fruitful in [their] emerging context", but that "might

dislodge some new ideas even if they did not hit the target directly" (Profeta, 2015:31). As previously mentioned, in the rehearsal process for *Tree*, which premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2000, Profeta was able to remind Lemon of previously discussed parameters when, in practice, Lemon reverted to known movement habits that he specifically meant to derail. She goes on to describe instances where her task was to stand outside and "to gently encourage (or laughingly shove) Ralph" inside, "towards the space of risk", within the performance or rehearsal arena (Profeta, 2015:202). Later in the book Profeta names this practice "deskilling", which she defines as "a rejection of a previously gained artistic competence, in order to shift priorities and reveal the values that virtuosity obscures" (Profeta, 2015:159). By Profeta's account, in negating skill and attempting to find a state of "trying-not-to-know" (2015:164) - as opposed to Lepecki's "not-knowing" (2011:192) - she was able to access a personal sense of "becoming a beginner again" (Profeta, 2015:164) where the "holes in [her] perception" (2015:162) would enable her to see what she was not able to see before. Deskilling is thus a process by which technical skill is interrupted or disturbed for the good of practices of invention. This is especially important for dancer-choreographers of great virtuosic ability, since a reliance on form can function as an aesthetic crutch that inadvertently supersedes conceptual clarity, as was the case with Lemon during *Tree*. Even if the dance-maker's intent is to show a work of pure technical prowess, there are still conceptual underpinnings that need to be addressed in order to ensure that the artist's voice is not lost, or not overtly derivative, even if that derivation comes from the artist's own previous performances (assuming that the artist is concerned with creating unique work).

In an attempt to deskill individual artistic tendency, "what we see is not a terminal decline of artistic skill, but the re-positioning of the notion of skill within a deeper dialectic: the necessary interrelationship between (received) skill, deskilling and re-skilling" (Roberts, 2010:92). Therefore, this step gives the dance-maker the opportunity to put aside habitual

ways of working, either in the body or conceptually, and to attempt to view or experience these habits as creative blocks that obscure perceptions of original or evolved intention. Though Profeta prefers the term "deskilling", Claire Bishop offers a more practical application in which the work of deskilling is rather achieved through reskilling, in a process she explains as "the move from one area of disciplinary competence to another" (Bishop, 2011).

Step Three in *Productive Negation* then asks that the artist's habit, tendency or "disciplinary competence" first be identified in terms of a specific skill, then defined in terms of broader existing contexts and finally translated into another artistic frame, whether complimentary to the original skill or not. Bishop, in her essay for the Brooklyn Rail, *Unhappy days in the Art World: De-skilling Theatre, Re-skilling Performance* (2011), shows examples of deskilling/reskilling as visual artists creating and performing plays, choreographers framing their work as fine art, and artists of all genres "outsourcing their work to other people" (Bishop, 2011).

Through the process of de- and reskilling, the dance-maker can distil their impulse or concept, or simply what the work they are making is about, into a form that requires deep analysis (in itself a soft subset of any negative dramaturgy) in order for the translation to be productive. Dramaturgical cognizance is required in that the artist's working concept needs to resonate in its subsequent physicalization into the chosen new form, which is tracked through initial research, observation and eventual feedback.

Field Notes

In the couple of weeks between the workshop in San Francisco and the workshop in Brooklyn, I evolved the day's proceedings significantly, adding an extra step in Brooklyn that addressed John Roberts's Marxist ideas of deskilling as value/labour contingencies, in what

Bishop refers to as "outsourcing [the] work to other people" (Bishop, 2011). Roberts states that "the assessment of value is based on how well the work, in its creation of new forms, withdraws from, and adulterates, inherited technique" (Roberts, 2010:81). It was therefore important that the dance-makers were given an opportunity to see how their work functioned outside of themselves in order for them to be able to perceive the relative success or failure of their habits in the hands of other people. As choreographers this forms the basis of a lot of how our work is done: we make a phrase, teach it to our dancers, and assess the legibility of our original intention. In my process though, the goal is not for the dancers to exemplify the "inherited technique", but for the dancemaker to see how their personal instincts in the approach to their work inhibits the formation of new or unexpected creative outcomes.

After a discussion of Bishop's essay, 'Unhappy days in the Art World: De-skilling Theatre, Re-skilling Performance' (2011), the participants created a new phrase of movement, or isolated a phrase from the previous day's choreography. As a way for each participant to quickly analyse their own phrases, I guided them through a free-writing exercise with four prompts that lasted two minutes each. The writing prompts were:

1. Choose one word that epitomizes the dance phrase you just made. Elaborate on the word, either by defending the choice or through a free-association of meanings surrounding the word.
2. Choose a single gesture out of the movement you created (the first one that comes to mind) and describe it.
3. Isolate a feeling or emotion that occurred to you during the performance of the phrase. It can be a sense memory or a narrative evocation.
4. Reflect on the imagined or non-imagined space within which the dance phrase exists.

The writing prompts serve to essentialize the movement phrase, and are a gentle introduction to the notion of deskilling/reskilling as it places one form of art into the context of another. The dance phrase, already deskilled during this writing process, is seen through the lens of a discipline that the participants might not be competent in to begin with. Alternatively, a participant might have a strongly developed writing skill, but is unable to work within a short time frame, etc. All of these elements serve to reorient or disorient the artist, enabling them to see the work from a new angle.

In San Francisco I gave the participants five minutes to use this writing to strip down their original phrase and place it into a new context, which could take the form of a translation of the movement into text (poems, dialogue, monologue), fine art (drawing, painting, installation), music (songs, singing, composing, noise, soundscapes) or a different dance technique than what the original phrase was made in. Next, they were to abandon the original phrase along with its written analysis and reskill their work based solely on the material they generated during the period of deskilling. In the showing that followed, each participant presented both their deskilled and reskilled work along with a question that they had about the work they presented. In contrast to the previous day, I allowed the observers to respond to the artist's question sincerely, though any questions posed to the artist could remain unanswered. One of the participants on this day deskilled her work to a state of inertia by laying against the wall with her back towards us, motionless. In her reskilled version she was standing, constantly moving (though minutely) shifting her gaze or a limb almost imperceptibly. The question she brought to us was: "What can I do satisfy the audience even less [in the context of the expectation of movement]?"

In Brooklyn, after their attempts at deskilling their own movement phrases, I asked the participants to pair up and to create written tasks or directives (without using descriptive language) based on their original, un-deskilled phrases that would help their partner get as

close to their original phrase as possible. No one had seen anyone's original phrases, so each partner had to create the phrase blindly, based only on the directions they were given. Afterwards, the pairs showed each other their phrases, and each participant then reflected on whether their intentions manifested, and how differently or similarly individuals interpreted the same set of directives. The reskilling procedure for this group was then to extract their predominant impressions from the phrases their partner presented to them, and to use that as the basis for their new reskilled dances. It was also important for the participants to notice what they *didn't like*, or what didn't resonate with them in their partner's interpretation of their directives. In this way the failure of their intended directives clarified their own misdirections about their own work, leading to a greater understanding of their own objectives. One participant reported that she experienced a new association of movement imagery in the phrase that her partner made from her set of directives that she had not previously considered, and emphasized this image in her newly reskilled phrase.

Out of the four steps in *Productive Negation,* this step leaves the most room for experimentation. Even though the theoretical base is fixed, the practical application can be approached in a myriad of different ways. I am not able to gauge whether the deskilling and reskilling procedures were more successful in San Francisco or in Brooklyn (and I question the importance of this in the first place), though in Brooklyn the connection to dramaturgical analysis and observation had more emphasis, and prepared them better for the following step, in which they are to create and implement their own dramaturgical strategies.

Step Four: Strategy: What further questions do you have?

Step four in the Critical Response Process is *Permissioned Opinions,* during which Lerman allows the Responders to present any feedback that has been unaddressed during the preceding three steps, on the condition of approval by the Artist. Lerman argues that some

feedback will remain unnecessary for the Artist, and thus it is important for the Artist to be able to choose whether or not they would like to hear a specific opinion, or whether they would want to hear an opinion from a specific Responder about the work (Lerman & Borstel, 2003:22). In my experience of the fourth step in practice, Facilitators discourage the use of any sort of value judgement (for example, statements that start with "I like") and instead ask that Responders base their shared observations on what they noticed in the work, starting their statements or questions with "I see". This feedback strategy honours the neutrality that Lerman aims to uphold in the Critical Response Process, while simultaneously indicating to the Artist what sections of the work need more attention, or what elements are resonating with intended desire. Either way, the fourth step functions as strategic mobilization for the evolution in the Artist's process, though it glosses over whatever problems the production might be facing due to restrictions on the feedback based on the artist's singular perception of the needs of the work.

Building on this idea, *Productive Negation*, in this final stage, expressly focuses on strategic mobilization, and aims to propel the dance-making process towards a new pragmatic and conceptual evolution of the work by disrupting the propensity to immediately resolve the production's issues. Here the group can propose strategies to advance the next iteration of the process, channelling opinionated thought, whether positive or less so, into the identification and, even creation, of problematic or underdeveloped aspects of the work. Opinion is not withheld in order to protect the dance-maker's feelings, but rather because personal preference, especially in the context of collaboration, rarely mobilizes the work. Productivity and creativity are stunted in the presence of positive affirmation (as John Holloway reminds us: "Yes is an answer, no is a question" [Holloway, 2005:269]) and dissatisfaction is seldom expressed in the absence of an emotional narrative, which is arguably also to the detriment of the work. Personal relationship between the artist and the dramaturg/collaborators should be

comprised of a mutual understanding of loyalty to the work, rather than to "personal ego or mythology" manifested in an appeasement of the artist by the dramaturg/collaborators (Cvejić, 2010). As the focus of the theatre- or dance-making process is the work produced, being able to pose strategies for further development based on the identified issues instead of supplying brash opinion is crucial to the longevity of both a productive creative environment and reciprocal respect. The group works strategically, rather than impulsively. The dance-makers learn to create outside the restrictions of positive reinforcement, and to delve deeply into an analysis, and even development, of overarching problems facing the work. Through this process they are able to familiarize themselves with the work's difficulties and lean into the uncomfortable, messy spaces of dance-making.

This step poses an opportunity for the collaborators to be inventive, though a recommended access point into this kind of liberated problem-solving, or problem-making, is Bojana Cvejić's "methodology of problem".

> When I say a problem, I in fact mean an approach or a method which forces the work on a performance to deviate from the possible. [...] The production of a problem doesn't begin with possibilities, since they are a matter of knowledge that we account for as the limits to be pushed, but with ideas that diverge and differentiate the conditions of the new. (Cvejić, 2010)

Cvejić argues that her methodology of problem is "an invention of constraints that would act as enabling conditions" (Cvejić, 2010), rather than a starting exploration of too many viable possibilities that will over-complicate and extend already constricted production times. Cvejić experiences this limitation of possibility as a productive technique that focuses on the creation of concepts rather than the elaboration of pre-informed ideas. Contrary to Profeta's wild questioning without an expectation of solution, Cvejić poses the condition of the problem as an anti-rhetorical question. She sees the problem as an opportunity to excavate the precise circumstances that will bring answers. In her work with Eszter Salamon in 2007, Cvejić employed this method to limit the options surrounding a conceptual idea that eventually

turned into *And then*, a performance about eight individual women all named Eszter Salamon (Salamon, 2007). In *And then*, homonymy posed a problem of excess, as there were too many stories to be told in too many different ways. Initially conceiving the project as a solo performance for Salamon, they soon realized that one voice would universalize the concept in a way that would undermine the intention they wished to explore. Methodology of problem pushed the production to include techniques unfamiliar to both Cvejić, as the dramaturg, and to Salamon, as the choreographer, in a process that essentially mimicked de- and reskilling, as mentioned in the previous step. Cvejić explains that by leaning into the problem they stripped down superfluous aspects of the work that lead them to incorporate audio-visual technology, something neither of them knew anything about, disrupting their usual choreographic habits in order to realign their generative thinking towards new possibilities. Deskilling/reskilling is thus a logical prerequisite for this methodological strategy, reinforcing my belief in the efficacy of *Productive Negation*'s procedures.

As the final step in the process of *Productive Negation*, Strategy points away from solutions based on permissible, superficial opinion of the work, and towards solutions based on a deeper investigation into the work's shortcomings by not only identifying its issues, but also generating possible new problems that demand the restructuring of artistic impulse.

Field Notes

As we had already discussed Cvejić's methodology of problem on the second day, the last day of the workshop focused on summarizing the dramaturgical strategies that we practiced during the week, as well as building personal dramaturgical strategies that each participant could employ in the continuing development of the work that they started during this process. Restricted by time to implement the last step of the process, as well as to prepare for the penultimate showing of the dances we created during the course of the workshop, the last day

presented me, as the facilitator, with a few interesting challenges. Even though Cvejić's methodology was not the focus of the day, we used the specific obstacles that faced us in the presentation of our work as inspiration for the structure of the event, rather than trying to find quick solutions that would facilitate the formal production of a 'dance concert'.

Our main activity, before we started rehearsal for that evening's presentation, was a theoretical exercise in the development of a personal creative strategy. I guided the participants through a series of writing prompts that resulted in a basic dramaturgical model that they would be able to apply to any new project but using the week's labour as their template. The prompts were:

1. Create a coherent statement of intent about the work you want to create/have created. Start your first sentence with: "I intend to…"
2. Formulate a research question based on your statement of intent. Start your first sentence with: "My question is…"
3. Brainstorm strategies that will answer this question. For example, what 'work' do you have to do outside of the dance studio in order to answer this question? What books/lectures/performances/experiences would contribute to your investigation? How would you incorporate the information gained through these external mediums into your studio practice and material development?
4. What compositional strategies would support your statement of intent, and research question?
5. What would the work look like with an unlimited production budget?
6. What aspects of your 'unlimited budget' production are practically or conceptually manageable within the confines of your actual budget?

7. What feedback system would be helpful during this process? What do I need to know from others, and how often? How can other people help me in the creation of this work? Why would I need this specific type of help?
8. What do I show in the performance? How necessary is it for the statement of intent and the research question to reflect transparently during the performance?
9. After the dance is performed, how can I continue to develop it? Or how can I productively reflect on the experience?

As *Productive Negation* is a procedural model that the dance-maker can use at various intervals within the process of creating a new work, my overall assumption about the implementation of the process is that it privileges the work-in-progress in concurrence with working towards a final product. During the four days of each workshop the participants were studying the steps via the creation of a new solo dance that was to be performed on the last day of the workshop. This posed a novel problem for me. I had to stress the importance of returning to the model throughout the dance-making process while being unable to show the efficacy of this type of interruption since we were working with one step per day, culminating in a single performance. The participants created their solos using the model of *Productive Negation* as creative impetus, shaping the work through the parameters set in place by each of the steps. In this context the model was applied compositionally, rather than as a regularly imposed feedback apparatus. In retrospect this had significant impact on the last day's proceedings, as each of the participants was preparing for the public showing and needed to frame the work in that capacity, rather than in mobilizing a future iteration of the work, as proposed in Step Four. My solution to this dilemma was to diffuse the audience's expectation of finalized product by structuring the showing in a way that exemplified the continued investigation of the work that *Productive Negation* proposes. The participants revealed the

week's process to the audience by starting with a reading that traced the evolution of their statements of intent, thereafter performing their deskilled and reskilled dances, and finally asking their research questions to the audience before performing their final phrases of movement. I urged the audience to take notes, and to jot down any questions that they might have for the participants that came up during their experiences of the performances. These questions then easily mobilized the concluding feedback session, where the audience ostensibly became the participants' collaborators by fuelling the strategy that Step Four suggests.

The Future of Productive Negation

Even though I propose a deep and detailed investigation of the process surrounding dance-making, it was my goal with this showing on the last day in Brooklyn to illustrate how a seemingly slow process can yield quick and productive results. My aim with these workshops was to illustrate how a new productive model can be implemented, where saying *no* isn't merely destructive (limiting the theatre-maker to the point of inertia) but is a way to instigate an analytical procedure by which the dramaturg/collaborators constructively curtail positive reinforcement that may result in an excess of information, ideas, and opinions. The act of negation embodies a powerful force of conviction that clarifies muddled subjectivity popular in art criticism today, and yet it leaves enough room for focused investigation. This can be seen in the proposed four-step working model of *Productive Negation* based on Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process*. Far from being an in-depth discourse on theories of negation, *Productive Negation* is a methodology that attempts to marry theoretical and practical applications through the interpretive voice of the dramaturg in a collaborative environment.

It is important to view this methodological structure as a work-in-progress in and of itself, basking in the potential of many future failures, negations, mistakes and blunders. As

this process was a preliminary investigation into the potential of *Productive Negation*, more work needs to be done in order to continue to evolve the process. As a final intervention, I will apply the four steps of the new process to the process itself, in a meta-analysis of the work, to expose its fissures.

What questions have not been answered?

As this study is a primary attempt to focus my thinking around the codification of a process, and since that process champions an investigation of omissions, I am including a series of unaddressed questions that, once considered, will resolve the superficiality associated with any project in emergent stages. The questions are: How can I make the method's political ideologies overt? How do I further queer the project, besides being a queer womxn myself? How can I contextualize the method outside of "white supremacy culture" (Okun, 2001) as a white womxn with a certain amount of privilege? How can I continue to disentangle solo authorship in an increasingly narcissistic society? How can I structure the workshop more deliberately as processual, without having to legitimatize its results through a performative event?

Have I questioned my own questions?

As counter-questions I propose: Why is my explicit political ideology important in the evolution of the method? What does "queering" the process mean specifically in the context of this methodology? Is it not implicit in my own queerness? In which ways do the process, as it stands right now, play into "white supremacy culture" and are there ways in which the process stands outside of "white supremacy culture"? Why is it important to disentangle solo authorship? How does a performative outcome corrupt conceptual progress?

How can I ask my questions in a different way?

The next step in the evolution of *Productive Negation* is a return to the studio in two ways. The first way is to continue to build and redefine the workshop structure in order to deepen the investigation into the pedagogy surrounding the method, as well as to gauge the efficacy of the practice as self-dramaturgy in the hands of working artists. The second way is to apply the process in a dance-making environment (since that is my medium), with a team of people over a longer period of time, that will result in a formal showing of the work created. Both ways require a dedicated initiative to secure opportunity, space, funding and participants, and therefore an undefined period of preparation to garner interest in the project. The deskilling of the work of this dissertation will exist in the re-imagining of the practical and theoretical aspects of *Productive Negation* into capitalist terms, thinking through logistical parameters concerning financial, temporal and geographical factors in the form of grant-writing or other funding applications. The reskilling of the work of this dissertation will exist within each successive rehearsal towards the performance the dance created, as well as within the confines of the workshop's procedures.

What further questions do I have?

Strategically, the next steps in the evolution of *Productive Negation* concern an attempt to answer the above questions by returning to the studio, as mentioned, and taking the method out of the academic context and into the professional dance landscape. A personal perseverance in the collection and experience of other negative methodologies and dramaturgies (by other professionals in the field) will be paramount in further radicalizing my thinking around issues of negativity, positivity, productivity and non-productivity. Therefore, who the authors of these methods are, how they are implemented, and where these methods

exist will inspire and promote the future development of what I have coined here as *Productive Negation.*

Chapter Five: Concluding Thoughts

Productive Negation, as a methodology, is a framing device for dramaturgical interventions in the creative process among collaborators. When we are confused by something, when we are unable to connect to the work or when we simply do not like what is happening, *Productive Negation* proposes effective communication strategies through precise questioning (as posed by the first two steps) and analytical techniques (as posed by the last two steps) that will bolster continued collaboration. As *Productive Negation* decentralizes the artist as the singular conceptual force through the demand of a regular collective feedback practice, it guides each collaborator to effectively navigate personal opinion into articulate viewpoints. By delivering feedback to a collective, rather than to a solo artist, the sensitive nature of candid feedback is diffused, rather than concentrated. Professionalism remains intact.

The assembly of negative dramaturgies via Lepecki, Grotowski, Lecoq, Profeta, Bishop and Cvejić, as I've done here, provides a theoretical network that places *Productive Negation* in the company of collective thought that, though relatively young, possess a certain atavism. Besides Grotowski and Lecoq, each of the theatre-makers mentioned is my contemporary, which shows me that there is a current burgeoning movement against traditional expectations of working practices, against skill, comfortable in liminality, revelling in the problematic, but unified through the desire to eradicate seemingly stale artistic practice. The Critical Response Process has proved to be rich with potential in this regard, developing as a *via positiva* during the same historical moment as when Grotowski and Lecoq found alternative roads, and with the same intention of making 'better' art. Instead of building or expanding methods and pedagogies already rooted in antagonism, it was important to me to show how positivism, of the CRP for instance, could potentially erode the artmaking process. Lerman's CRP was already familiar to me, and since I had found the process to lack the type of criticality it promised, I researched and then applied negative dramaturgical strategies on a

hunch that I would personally garner more creatively provocative results when applied to my studio practice. This was the start of *Productive Negation,* with no resolve in sight. Processes, codified or not, are in-motion by default, and should always be considered to be works-in-progress.

May I continue find my own *via negativa.* May its darkness inspire me.

Postscript

When dancemakers sit down to write, we expect the words to work for us the way our dancers do. The blank page is the empty dance studio before rehearsal starts, and each following sentence is expected to perform with the same acute attention to metre, style and emotional resonance as a dancer's approach to the new choreographic phrases. We sense the limits of what we can achieve in the studio, or on the page, without letting it dictate the shape of our work. In fact, our limitations push us to creative solutions that might include traversing genre through a deviation in technique or structure, culminating in something altogether unexpected, even to our own sensibilities.

Productive Negation is, in this way, something altogether unexpected. Or perhaps, more accurately, it is not what I wanted it to be. It is too focused on productivity, too focused on cohesion. It is too restrained by dramaturgical efficiency to discard civility and embrace a fundamental purge of the performative product. It is a negative dramaturgy only in that it draws its power from negative dramaturgies. It is trapped in positivity (the way language is trapped in the patriarchy) as the premise of a creative process is that it works towards a thing, and that thing is only real when it is witnessed. The nothingness that I longed for in the creation of this work is only a "quasi-nothingness", or even worse, "almost a quasi-nothingness", as Lepecki explains in *We are not ready for the dramaturge* (Lepecki, 2011),

because there is still “authorial desire” in the manifestation of a disseration in the context of academia (189). In fact, I suspect my interest to be not in how negation can be used productively, but in how productivity can be negated, in *Negative Productivity*. But perhaps the two are linked. Perhaps I need to productively negate before I can negate productivity, and so in this way the process has worked, will continue to work, and will evolve towards its own extinction.

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