

**Some Bodies: Distance, separation and ambivalence in Nicola
Conibere's Assembly
Nicola Conibere**

[{figure1}]

The basics

A person—let's call her a spectator—decides to enter a room. As she does so, another person—let's call her a performer—enters that room from a different doorway. A straight line of tape stretches across the floor. The spectator is positioned on one side of the tape, and the performer on the other. After a certain period of time and activity the spectator decides to leave the room. The performer sees this, so exits at the same time. Each departs through the doorway by which they entered.

Placement

I should position myself. I am close to these words as their author and I am close to the subject they discuss as its choreographer. I am discussing a piece called Assembly (2013).^[note]¹ My proximity to Assembly can be identified through my detailed familiarity with its origins and development, and through my presence at its various public presentations. But I don't have intimate knowledge of its reaches. In writing this article, or in thinking about Assembly in general, I navigate the distances of time and place from its various public presentations, and from the experiences of the many people who have encountered the piece as performers and spectators. My closeness to the work includes these distances.

Methods for positioning, and structuring experiences of relation, have long been a part of choreographic practices. Choreographies make proposals for the distribution of bodies (human or otherwise) in time and space according to any number of organizing forces. In 2013, Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Hölischer reminded us that developments under globalized neoliberal capital

have seen that '[w]hile one part of the world population deterritorialises itself voluntarily, the other part is forcibly prevented from entering this space' (2013: 7). They note that these developments relate to dance because they depend on the individual body as a mobile unit, and on distributing bodies in space (according to the needs of the global economy) (8). We may then consider acts of arranging bodies as deeply connected to political and economic forces, and likewise, that the ways in which we regard and relate with others on a daily basis are implicated by those same powers.

With Assembly, I engaged choreography as a vitalizing practice through which to explore the generative potentials of bodies, as means to reach beyond established and dominating narratives or images of how bodies can or should relate. It responded in part to how historical ideas of healthy social organization in Western political thought have fed into discourses about the value of spectatorship in performing arts, not least the idea that collections of people who can be seen to closely and harmoniously interact embody a social ideal (see Rousseau (1758), Schiller (1793), Matarasso (1997), Smith (1998)). Assembly asks what else a gathering of bodies does other than to serve normative narratives about communities or publics. It calls on the choreographic for its capacity to put distance between existing terms and images of social organization in order to enter a realm of potentials. This article reflects on how public presentations of the piece, including a range of spectatorial responses, met with these intentions and interests in its creation. Assembly's enquiry began by interrogating certain political characteristics of spectatorship. It led to a range of spectatorial responses that suggest an encounter with ethics.

The conditions

Assembly has been presented six times internationally at art galleries, libraries and performance venues, in contexts including contemporary art festivals and dance and performance programmes.{{note}}² In each place the work is learned and performed by local people, meaning that each version involved a different group of performers. It is a performance of at least three

hours, typically presented in a closed gallery space. The piece creates a kind of hybrid aesthetics of the gallery and the theatre by drawing on established conventions of spectatorship from both. It engages a temporality of the gallery that permits spectators to come and go as they please, while occurring within a theatrical spatial organization that clearly delineates performance and viewing areas; a single line of tape stretches across the floor and spectators are asked to remain on one side of it while performers occupy the other. The separation of roles is distinct and the performance articulates the distances between groups. Building on Jacques Rancière's notion of emancipated spectatorship (2009), the piece acknowledges each spectator's unique presence without asking them to do anything more than watch. Spectators enter the piece one at a time—although many may watch at once. Each time a spectator enters the gallery, a performer will arrive through a different doorway and join the performance, leaving it when the same spectator departs the room. This structural rule is shared on information boards and freesheets available to visitors before they enter. Assembly's spectators do not influence the performers' physical activities once they are in the space; rather, their experience of the piece is built on their affiliation with a specific performer. They watch from a perspective of being directly in relation with one as well as with others. However, their presence affects the form of the work by determining the number of bodies in the room at any given moment. Since performers enter the room in response to the entry of spectators, there is necessarily always an equivalent number of people watching as there are performing, meaning that Assembly has the potential to offer a one-to-one experience, or twenty-to-twenty and so on. The only exception to spectators entering the piece one at a time is if an infant and parent or a person with a carer wish to enter together; in those cases, two performers will also enter at that moment.

The performers enact an open score. Each time a new performer enters—prompted, of course, by the entry of a new spectator—they will place themselves in the room and then present a simple action or position continuously. Other performers who are already present will watch that person, and then join them in the same activity, if approximately so. This is

unison with rough edges, each performer moving according to their body's needs and energy. All of the performers will recognize the action just introduced. Assembly has a menu of fourteen possible actions or positions with which the performers are familiar, but each of them will choose which to present on their respective entries—the order is neither prescribed nor predictable. The activities on offer are not spectacular and do not involve extraordinary ability. As a whole, they evoke characteristics of the organic or the mechanical. When more than one performer enacts them, they may create complex patterning, such as when performers stand and look from side to side, each one moving their head at a slightly different pace, or they may invoke a hypnotic sense of flow as performers roll across the floor. Because its audience affects the form of the work, the dramaturgical journey is thus one of ebb and flow. An effect of the piece's lack of formal resolution is that it seems to invite attention to what is presently unfolding. And from within each of these actions or positions, whether dancing on the spot, or sitting cross-legged, or standing and shaking, the performers look at the spectators (See figure 2). It is necessary for them to do so in order to know when the spectators to whom they are affiliated are leaving, so that they too can leave the performance. This eye contact also seems to draw attention to what is present, and later I discuss its further relational implications.

Practice

Part of what is at stake in situations of performance is how we, as performers and audience members, can appear and relate to one another. Given that, in our daily lives, the ways in which we read meaning into our encounters with other people is constantly evolving in its operations at personal and global levels, such spectatorial practice has been widely considered a civic exercise. Assembly responded to discussions of the politics of spectatorship as they pertain to notions of publics. Seeking to avoid the binary of the passive as separation from knowledge, versus the active as invigorating community, Assembly's structure articulates separation and distances to make space both for criticality and for possibility. These distances define the theatricality of a

work whose means of construction are exposed, but that lacks the spectacular, making space for the possibility of a spectator who, in Tracy C. Davis' terms, exercises the 'self-possession of a critical stance' (2004: 145). Davis extends a definition of theatricality that draws on Adam Smith's notion of impartial spectatorship as the self-created witnessing of one's own behaviour, describing a spectator's 'sympathetic breach' that leaves space for such criticality. Likewise, Assembly's theatrical distances created such spaces as and for reflection on self and other. Spectators who entered Assembly were given no instructions on how to act, other than to stay on one side of the line of tape from where they could watch the performers. Yet on the second day of presenting the piece as part of the Biennale of Sydney in April 2016, I entered the work after about an hour of its showing and found a handful of the large group of spectators laughingly copying the performers' actions. Later that day, as part of a post-performance discussion, one of those spectators identified himself as having begun this act of copying without any thought of whether others may join him. Rather, he spoke of a predicament in which he wanted to continue watching the piece, but felt guilty that his continued presence would require his affiliated performer to continue performing an activity that appeared quite tiring. The only way he could rationalize his continued presence as a spectator was to spend the same physical energy as the performer to whom he was linked. In this case, a spectator found himself in conditions that led him to ask an ethical question about how he should act in relation to others.

Over several presentations of the piece quite a number of spectators have expressed similar sentiments: many have exited the piece only to re-enter, explaining that they 'felt bad' for making their performer perform for so long—they wanted to give them a break. It's probably fair to say that conventional presentations of theatre and dance, including immersive practices, don't usually provoke this type of conundrum for a viewer. Here, it would seem that the separations (of individual entries) and distances (across viewing and performing areas) that contributed to constructing the connection between a spectator and performer also created space for the type of critical stance of which Davis writes and that carries the potential to change how we act. As

Davis states, 'It is not solely in intersubjectivity that civil society is maintained, but in what separates us' (2004: 152). However, I would suggest that, in this scenario, it is not only criticality that is at work, nor necessarily the clarity implied by 'self-possession', but also the uncertain interference of our capacities, as human beings, for affect. In turn, the inter-articulation of criticality and affect carries us into a realm of unstable potentials for how we may imagine, experience and understand the very notions of the civic or the public, and their corresponding qualities of relation.

Remembering

I enter Assembly, and as I settle into sitting cross-legged on the floor, I see a group of eight or so performers stop walking from side to side and sit in roughly three small groups. Most of them, like me, sit cross-legged. That my performer happened to introduce this position at the same moment as I is coincidence. The room feels quite still, but the small fidgets and shifts of weight made by performers, and the relaxed manner with which they look around at spectators, creates a sense of calm. I felt that they were with me. I looked at them sitting cross-legged and was reminded specifically of school assemblies; I was pleased with the work's title. Having met the eyes of a few performers, I began to notice the curious detail created by the ankle of one. In turn I saw the shapes made with and between bodies. I saw folded legs and arms being leaned on. I was struck for the first time by the fact that their small, quiet gatherings, in which they rarely look at one another or clearly interact, nonetheless demonstrate a level of trust or ease that comes from familiarity. When the noise of the door opening causes me, and others, to look away from this scene, it feels too soon, as if I was easing my way into a meditative encounter that has now been interrupted. Instead, a new spectator arrives and I watch a new performer walk towards the front of the performance area, sit down, and begin to shunt herself backwards along the floor. The other performers see this and make the easy transition from sitting on the ground to shunting across it. Now, there is sound and movement. It's a striking shift of tone to which I quickly adapt. I hear material sliding and feet repeatedly pushing into the floor. The constant rhythm of these sounds and movements

fills the room. I look at a couple of performers specifically and see the mechanics at work in their bodies—pivoting their weight on their hands and heels, bending and straightening arms and legs—while my peripheral vision catches the continuous flow. When performers reach the back wall, they stand and walk through the shifting bodies to the front of the performance area, only to re-join the shunting action. There is a cyclical flow at work, bodies in a continuum of shunting backwards and walking forwards. The room hosts a stream of energy, but it is a peopled form, and now and again those people smile at me, relaxing the impact of those mechanics and that force of energy. I notice the door opening from the corner of my eye but in the same moment I am caught by one performer's direct and beaming smile, so I smile back as she pushes herself along the ground. I miss the entry of the new performer but notice those already present heaving themselves off the floor to stand and look from side to side. The noise dissipates quickly but the rhythmic motion of moving parts seems to have tipped from one form into another. I look at the performers, am briefly held by another performer's knowing eyes, and then return my attention to their collective creation of a flickering form. I am reminded of candles and flip clocks. Moments of coincidence occur across the communal form when two or three heads by chance turn to one side in unison, but their coordination is quickly lost. The door opens and, echoing the performers, I looked right to see a new spectator enter, and then left to watch a new performer walk into the midst of the others and lie down.

I'm with you

Assembly's structural rule of one performer per spectator makes explicit the fact of co-presence in any performance situation—'I'm here because you are'. The qualities of intimacy that the performance invites are enhanced by the degree of eye contact between performers and spectators. As already noted, it is necessary for each performer to look at spectators in order to see their affiliated spectator leave, but their gazes equally move from one viewer to another, spending a little time with, and returning often to each. As the work's choreographer, I intended these meetings of the gaze to act as invitations for

viewers to be in the room, and for them to look at the many performers whose eyes they encounter. It is a sociable practice, meaning that some spectators find this awkward, some will look away or at their phones, while others enter into an exchange of looking in return or smiling. So, throughout a visit with the piece, spectators' attention may shift between experiencing the forms and atmospheres created by bodies in the room, and more acute experiences of self and other, an ebb and flow of attention that echoes the shape of the piece. Recalling his encounter with Assembly in Leeds Central Library in the UK, dance scholar Ramsay Burt wrote of his affiliated performer:

From time to time we'd find each other's gaze again. At one moment, for some reason, we both spontaneously started smiling at one another in a slightly complicitous way... I was aware of the small difference I was making to the larger performance event that was unfolding. (Burt 2016)

Burt's attention was in part returned to his capacity to affect and be affected without 'some reason' why, in a moment that was not predictable and that may or may not have been noticed by others. While the invitation for one person to look at another is an intimate one, in Assembly this exchange does not seek to represent a recognizable or desirable mode of relation, just as the performers' actions do not create specifically recognizable images, nor seek to demonstrate a response to specific attributes of viewers' appearances. These conditions create the possibility for unclear, unpredictable moments of affect that are more or less visible to others (an exchange of smiles between performer and spectator may be witnessed, whereas feeling a sense of responsibility, or embarrassment, may not). Insofar as intimacy is experienced, it is akin to what Lauren Berlant has called the relationally produced spaces and connections that impact on people and on which they often depend, but that may not fit expressions of normative ideologies (1998: 284–5).

Some body

In Assembly, these qualities are also made possible through the work's various strands of ambivalence. For example, a performer's eye contact with spectators is not designed to suggest that the spectator is not just 'a face in the crowd' but rather its opposite: that she is just a face in the crowd, but a face that belongs to a bodied personality that is affecting the present event. Just as the piece does not care who enters the gallery yet is committed to responding to somebody who does, neither does it make any kind of representative assertion to spectators as a group (which a performance strategy like mirroring their form might). Assembly is ambivalent about the status of its spectators and its performers: the order by which performers enter and the action they each choose to present is arbitrary (from within the rules of the piece). Here, the performers' agency in deciding who should enter next and which action should be presented may be read as characteristics that fit well-worn images of participation or representing democracy through performance process. However, these are not public acts and so cannot operate or be interpreted as such. In a similar vein, usually a significant number of Assembly's performers have no experience of performing or do not consider it a profession, but this information is withheld from marketing materials. Therefore, these traits avoid art critic Claire Bishop's concern with 'delegated performance' in visual arts practices, deployed as a route to authenticity through participants' proximity to a social reality 'conventionally denied to the artist who deals merely in representations' (2012: 237). In Assembly, the performers' not-knowing which action or performer will enter next, nor when exactly that will happen, means they must attend to one another, as well as to the spectators, in a given moment of a temporary situation. The piece's resistance to performing readily recognizable demonstrations of participation seems to have permitted more aleatory qualities of interdependency and affect to come to the fore. Between its framework, eye contact and ambivalence, Assembly encouraged attention to what was present. Having exposed its structural rule from the start, it reveals no spectacular or unexpected developments; it has no tricks up its sleeves, only bodies sharing space and time. These conditions allow for the emergence of choreography as a practice of discovering experiences of

relation between such differently textured materialities as bodies, spaces, times and their as yet unknown futures.

Being seen

When presenting the work as part of the ANTI Festival of Contemporary Art in Kuopio, Finland, in 2014, the piece was performed by a group of young people aged from 15 to 18 years. The intention here was to explore what a particular constituency of performers may reveal about the choreographic reaches of the piece, and the decision to work with teenagers a response to how, in the UK at least, the image of gatherings of youths in public places is typically framed as threatening. While the performers were similar in age, their range of appearances was wide. Some looked like children younger than their years, while others wore adulthood with apparent fearlessness. The audience response in Kuopio was incredibly charged and saw many people leave in tears, something that has happened in other performances, but infrequently. Some spectators stated that they were moved by the direct address of the young performers' eyes, while others could find no words or reasons for their response. After the show the young performers playfully insisted that it was because Finnish people are 'all emotionally repressed'. While Assembly does not work with representative images, and while it does not respond to the individual appearances of spectators, it does not claim to remove the role of our social matrices in spectatorial experiences of affect. The teenagers in Kuopio may have individually fit certain stereotyped images of young people but, via the structure of the piece, they invited visitors to experience those images through qualities of affect their stereotypes would refuse. Through Assembly, spectators encountered the potentials for those young people's appearances and presences to affect them in ways that may be less familiar.

[{figure4}]

We gather

Assembly asks what else people do when they gather together other than serve existing narratives about what such gatherings may mean. It suggests

that engaging in some modes of separation and distance invites the possibility for performers and spectators to attend to the potentials for criticality and affect that spaces for performance host. This event of theatre, Assembly, may then share qualities with other pretexts or denominated reasons for coming together, whether for protest or for a birthday party. These pretexts or reasons are clear and share a more or less ritual function. But we may also say that we gather at such events for 'some other' reasons whose names are less certain. Each of these gatherings carries distances and separations because we enter them from our places in the social hierarchies that we navigate every day. To acknowledge individual 'separation' in this performative sense is not to promote self-sufficiency or self-promotion, but to note difference as the distance between our bodies—bodies that are by their bounded nature necessarily separate from one another. Assembly prompted a wide range of spectatorial responses, only a handful of which I have discussed here. I hope the work's resistance to representation makes space for each of us involved in its encounter to exercise responsiveness to how our bodies can be in relation with one another across these differences and distances, not least through the criticality and affect they invite.

Assembly's requirement that its performers attend to a given moment and to one another offers a type of freedom from temporal projections towards particular images or pathways. Here, freedom recalls philosopher Brian Massumi's 'margin of manoeuvrability' that notes the potentials of a given moment (2002: 3). The performers' experiences of freedom in this case were based on being responsive and available to other people with whom they shared the space. They were in what we may call a vulnerable relation to spectators. For spectators, we may in turn consider their experiences of vulnerability to the performers, of being affected by them, as a form of 'involuntary participation' (Sabisch 2013: 123). Dance scholar Petra Sabisch has used this term in her exploration of the notion of contamination to name qualitative transformations and their effects that allow for 'alliances, and relations of all kinds... as the power to assemble' (ibid.). Sabisch notes that having articulated its method through the particular conditions it creates, contemporary choreography permits qualitative transformations of

experiences of relation. In Assembly, choreography makes space to attend to affective experience in its varied intensities. This freedom, which is conjured by people being vulnerable to one another, must at least partly participate in the impulse to congregate across forms of theatre and other public gatherings. The ways in which it invites attention to spaces of relation indicates how our social bodies always and already produce their sociality together in ways other than representation.

Such procedures are already at work in gatherings of bodies in protest that, at the time of writing, occur almost weekly in the city of London where I live. Writing a few years earlier in response to the Occupy movement and the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2010, Judith Butler has discussed how ‘the body “speaks” politically’ in action and gesture, as action and claim (2011: 4). She considers how ‘assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce the public character of that material environment’ (1). In enclosed, institutionally supported and temporally specific conditions, Assembly offers an experience of the undecidability of collective action as something that cannot translate into clear representation because it cannot represent a single individual, nor a homogeneous group. This runs counter to the criticisms levelled against the Occupy movement, which include its lack of formally articulated aims, intentions and strategies.^{[note]3} Assembly suggests that an impulse to gather is also an impulse to be vulnerable. Its peopled gatherings do not represent protest movements, and it does not make a claim for the multitude. Rather, it is an offer for people to be vulnerable to one another, in a minor way, which generates multiple perceived experiences of relation—moments shared in proximity with one another.^{[note]4}

[figure5]

Notes

1 Assembly was originally produced by Dance4 and supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

2 Assembly has been presented at: Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 2013, part of Nottedance Festival produced by Dance4; Kuopio City Library, part of ANTI Festival of Contemporary Art, 2014, Kuopio, Finland; Drill Hall, Sydney, Australia, 2016, part of the 20th Biennial of Sydney in partnership with Critical Path; Tanssin talo/Dance House Helsinki, Finland, 2016; Leeds Central Library, UK, 2016, part of Juncture produced by Yorkshire Dance; Tramway, Glasgow, UK, 2016.

3 Journalist John Harris, writing a largely sympathetic piece in The Guardian about the Occupy London Stock Exchange camp at St Paul's Cathedral, noted 'the absence of a clever exit strategy' (2012).

4 With thanks to the many performers of Assembly: Rebecca Anderson, Tara Baker, Stacey Bedwell, Nicola Carter, Katy Coe, Seraina Dejacó, Francesca Feeley, Emma Fell, Ania Kuklewicz, Yvonne Lake, Emma Lloyd, Greg Manderson, Joop Oonk, Abigail Parsons, Don Rowe, Lauren Sharp, Lizzie Sells, Kalila Storey, Robert Suchy, Hannah Whitlow, Thomas Kelly, Karen Kerkhoven, Bonnie Curtis, Adam Warburton, Helene Markstein, Jayne Watt, Briana Longville, Karen Fermin, Laura Osweiler, Taree Sansbury, Verónica Barac, Jess Homan, Bonnie Cowan, Tom Blake, Oliver Uski, Kukka Koo, Marjo Pipinen, Jukka Linna, Erja Koivunen, Seela Petra, Jyrki Mustonen, Janica Grönqvist, Anne Pietarinen, Anni Mäenpää, Marjukka Savolainen, Aino Salmela, Merja Raatkainen, Tuula Sarivaara, Meri Lähteenaro, Tina Toivanen, Riikka Seppälä, Katariina Väisänen, Satu Tahvanainen, Matilde Cozzi, Paola Franulovic, Francisca Paiva, Donata Vezzato, Irene Kelso, Katrine Turner, Ines Coelho, Margaret Goudie, Leila Riszko, Molly Mae Whawell, Phil Eaglesham, Katy Hundertmark, Sophie Suominen, Marianne Milligan, Hasanain Baldawi, Shannon Barrett, Elizabeth Belle Betteridge, Jane Dale, Anthony Haddon, Elaine Harvey, Charlotte Hempenstall-Matthews, Annie-Louise Hird, Mary Males, Mia Siberry-Scott, Ana Silverio, Olivia Smith, Noelle Thompson, Poppy Tierney and Grace Whitfield.

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Captions

Figure 1. Assembly by Nicola Conibere, at Nottingham Contemporary 2013.
Photo Christian Kipp.

Figure 2. Performers of Assembly at Tramway in Glasgow, 2016, exchanging eye contact with spectators. Photo Tim Nunn.

Figure 3. Assembly at Nottingham Contemporary, 2013. Photo Christian Kipp.

Figure 4. Assembly at Tramway, Glasgow, 2016. Photo Tim Nunn.

Figure 5. Assembly at Nottingham Contemporary, 2013. Photo Christian Kipp.