Collective Creation as a Theatre of Immanence
Deleuze and The Living Theatre
Laura Cull

In this chapter I want to focus on the philosophical implications of collective creation with respect to the work of the US company The Living Theatre (1947–) and in relation to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1925–95). That is, this chapter starts from the premise that what is at stake in collective creation is ontological, as well as ethical and political, and suggests that we might be well equipped to understand the ethical and political dimensions of this instance of collective creation from a philosophical point of view. In particular, I want to examine the productivity of addressing the specificity of collective creation as a method of organizing the process of performance making, in the light of the conceptual dyad of immanence/transcendence that is at the heart of Deleuze’s thought. Then, having argued that both immanence and transcendence are best understood as tendencies rather than mutually exclusive qualities, I draw from some additional examples—including Jerzy Grotowski and the contemporary performance company Goat Island—to explore collective creation as a mode of performance practice that is defined not simply in terms of a rejection of the (transcendent) figures of “the director” and “the author” but as a practice that constitutes an immanent rethinking of both directing and authorship. Or, framed differently, I want to try to articulate the complex philosophical, ethical, and political relationship between collective creation and its “others” (i.e., directed and/or scripted theatre).

Bearing these aims in mind, and as I hope will become clearer as I go on, I do not mean to use philosophy to retrospectively valorize any and all practices that have referred to themselves or been referred to as “collective creation.” Rather, I hope to generate an alternative, philosophical definition (as distinct from a historical or technical definition) of collective creation that might allow us to approach various historical and contemporary performance practices differently. In this way, I mean to take up Bruce Barton’s spirited call to allow definitions of collective...
creation—and the correlative connections those definitions establish between collective creation and the related concepts of “collaboration” and “devising”—to “become open sites for multiplicity, for . . . contestation, and . . . for creation.”

Indeed, this call resonates with Deleuze’s own definition of philosophy as the creation of concepts and his argument that we must judge theories on their functionality or usefulness in practice: “[T]reat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don’t suit you, find another pair.” Likewise, rather than become embroiled in debates whether or not specific practices or performances count as collective creation, I wonder if we are better served by allowing the conjunction of practice and concept to be mutually transformative and mutually questioning.

What Is Collective Creation? A Deleuzian Approach

In Deleuze’s processual philosophy, which has been not only the primary influence on my recent thought but a key resource for Goat Island founding member Matthew Goulish, both concepts of collectivity and creativity, of the multiplicity of the group (rather than the sovereignty of the individual) and the radical difference of creation (rather than the sameness of reproduction), feature very strongly. For instance, we might wish to note in passing that Deleuze wrote several of his works in collaboration with the activist and analyst Félix Guattari—and that Guattari also devoted much of his independent work to the analysis of groups in both psychoanalytic and political context. In this next section, though, I will outline three of the key concepts related to collectivity and creativity that appear in Deleuze’s work: difference, immanence (and its relationship to Deleuze’s critique of hylo-morphism), and judgment (and its relationship to his critique of “the subject”).

So first, “difference.” Most critically perhaps, the notion of creativity lies at the heart of the fundamental ontological premise that Deleuze’s philosophy espouses—namely, that the world is just a collection of interacting processes of perpetual creation. In this context, creation means the production of novelty or qualitative (rather than quantitative) “difference,” and Deleuze’s goal (like that of his contemporary, Jacques Derrida) is to liberate difference from its historical construction as a derivative of identity—for instance, as that which we can think of, merely, in terms of the difference between two things. Rather, Deleuze wants to show “how it is in fact the movement of difference [or creation] itself that produces the apparent stability of the world of fixed identities (of substances and essences).” In turn, Deleuze argues that we need to develop a mode of thinking adequate to this primary creativity by going “beyond the form of identity, in relation to both the object seen and the seeing subject.” One suggestion that I hope to develop here is that the performative practice of collective creation might be one form that this thinking might take. Collective creation is a mode of thinking adequate to the primacy of difference.

A second key concept in Deleuze’s elaboration of his philosophy (and, as we shall see, ethics) of creation is the notion of “immanence” as distinct from “transcendence.” To simplify, we might suggest that, in Deleuze’s thought, these two terms name contrasting modes of relation to the primary process of creation or