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Collective Subjectivity and Utopian Desire

Stewart A. Stout
CUNY Hunter College

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Collective Subjectivity and Utopian Desire

by

Stewart Stout

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Constance DeJong
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Signature of Second Reader
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As this is a project about collectives, I’d like to thank the many different groups of people who have shaped my understanding of the world and have had a profound impact on this work.

The first collective I belonged to was fragmented, split up and sometimes hostile, but also resilient and endlessly bound by love and solidarity. My mother Lucinda Servi and father Joe Stout were my first teachers of what it means to struggle and persevere. My sister Katie is superhumanly strong and continues to teach me what it means to stand up for each other. My siblings Rachel, Seth, Lou, Max, Vanessa, Andy and Melina and a lot more, thank you for teaching me my first lessons about community.

The queers who gather on a mountain in Tennessee to experiment and test out different ways of forming community, my comrades in the Party for Socialism and Liberation, and every collective who has dared to imagine a world outside of capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heterosexism, who put their bodies on the line to form the nascent structures of our collective liberation, you are the ones who teach us how to envision our individual bodies as tethered to each others fate, and you are the best hope we have.

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Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema.¹

- José Estaban Muñoz

It could be argued that no idea, save possibly those of accumulation and progress, is given a more sanctified position in the dominant capitalist ideology than that of the individual. Even the aforementioned concepts lose their ideological tethers when cut from the anchor of the individual, floating about without a singular subject to accumulate and progress. If the category of the individual provides the armature for the ideological underpinnings of capitalism, its opposite, the collective, in a very real way has provided the most coherent and long-standing challenge to them. What possibilities open up when the subjectivity of the individual is replaced by a subjectivity that is collective?

The separation of the one from the many might begin at our skin, as it seems to outline our bodies as forms separate and apart from each other and the atmosphere they occupy. But skin is soft and permeable, punctuated with holes, its biological function being as much about letting things in as keeping things out. We absorb and secrete water and oil and oxygen and germs and viruses through this bad barrier. The

dream of the skin as a wall falls apart rapidly. Of course, our skin, and every other organ that clicks into gear to keep our bodies functioning before they break back into the smallest specks of matter, is a collective endeavor already. Inherited DNA from moments of bodily comingling bond us to an endless list of other individuals, sequences of genomes that form ghosts crowded in our features, animated by our movements. And while our bodies provide a biological map away from the individual, history goes further in showing us that labor (a fundamentally collective endeavor) is the driving force behind the social, economic and cultural rituals that shape our material realities, and therefore our individual consciousness. One need look no further than a union, a strike, a mass demonstration, a commune to see this idea manifested materially. These efforts to intervene in the machinations of capital have been direct political struggles, but they also rely and build upon different ways of thinking of our bodies in concert with those around us that might signal a type of utopian impulse.

The dominant capitalist ideology posits the individual as the main (only) subjectivity available for us to negotiate strategies for liberation. But even a superficial and cursory glance at biology and history rip apart the myth of the individual as the primary subject. While bodily autonomy, and difference in general, remain critical to ideas of human and non-human liberation, the walled off individual is counter factual in

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2 It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the complex formation of the myth of the heroic singular actor both in capitalist and pre-capitalist history, but it is critical to mention the often unspoken assumptions that name this subject position as almost always male, white and heterosexual. A decentering of the individual as the primary subject then might (though not automatically) offer a decentering of its attendant power structures of patriarchy, white supremacy and heterosexism.
an age of collectivized production with privatized profit (much less an age of irreversible anthropogenic climate change). Importantly too, it has become an avenue to cut off desire for our collective liberation. We are stopped in our tracks from imagining new potentialities and subjectivities. If the individual is displaced as the singular position from which to see ourselves, the crowd might offer a new subjectivity, one that has the power to organize a desire for an “us” and create a gap from which we can work towards some other potential horizon(s). The body as a collective in this sense might act as a vehicle for a desire that is utopian, communist and queer.

II

On the subway I have the uneasy feeling one gets when they are just slightly too close, straining to maintain some level of autonomy against the crowd as we sway uncomfortably forward. It happens again as I move through the bar to collect glasses, wait in line at the supermarket with a stranger’s hot breath on the nape of my neck, as I walk passed groups of straight men in a gym, or on the street, or in an elevator, or basically anywhere. The presence of many individuals fighting for space makes me hyper aware of my own body in relation to, and sometimes at war with, the bodies around me. These crowds make me want to run away into myself, against the vague and uneasy weight.

It feels different on my brother’s shoulders, undulating against too many people in a small warehouse off of Virginia Street in Reno at my first punk show. At the
mobilization against the war in San Francisco where we laid in the intersection against hundreds of other bodies, on a mountain in Tennessee in the middle of the night pressed tight against the other bodies dancing on a porch. Here is a different kind of weight, where the force pressed against me feels more like floating. Little ruptures blur those assembled into one body at one moment.

I think a lot here about Jodi Dean and her work on the role of the crowd. For Dean, these momentary, ecstatic gatherings of many individuals represent an inadequate yet critical break with the dominant organizational and temporal modes of production\(^3\). These crowds represent a different kind of subjectivity, one that is simultaneously based on a subsuming and a heightening of difference, in that the individuals who form the crowd momentarily erase or ease the boundaries between each other even as they heighten the boundaries between them and the dominant system. If nothing else, they seem to offer a kind of opening or a gap to work through.

In an essay titled *Dual Power Redux*, Dean describes this type of crowd through the work of Elias Canetti:

> Arguing that the first task of utopianism is diagnosing the fear of utopia, Jameson posits a terror of the collective: “the existential fear of losing our individuality in some vaster collective being.” Canetti begins from a different primal fear: “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown.” The one place where man is free of this fear is in a crowd. “The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body [...] dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses against him.” The presence of many relieves us of the anxiety of being touched by the strange or unknown. “Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body.”\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, S.l.: Verso, 2018

In the essay, Dean offers important addendums to those who would see the crowd as the basis for a new political formation, pointing to its inherent impermanence and lack of organized direction. “Pushing against dominant arrangements, the crowd prefigures a collective, egalitarian possibility – but “prefigures” in a completely literal way: “prior to figuration.” The crowd by itself, unnamed, doesn’t provide or represent an alternative. It cuts out an opening by breaking through the limits bounding permitted experience.”

Still, together with circulating ideas around the breakdown of categories of the human and non-human, this opening seems fertile for refiguring the body in a utopian push to break with capitalist realism.

Maybe it’s appropriate in this land of living through others, that I keep using one person to quote another. In Cruising Utopia, José Estaban Muñoz offers a view of the crowd from the queer perspective of Samuel Delaney. In a move that puts public sex and the Happenings of Fluxus in conversation with direct political action, Muñoz says:

Public sex culture revealed the existence of a queer world, and Kaprow’s Happening explained ways in which such utopian visions were continuously distorted. Delaney explains that “the first apprehension of massed bodies” signals a direct sense of political power. This apprehension debunks the dominant ideology’s characterization of anti-normative subject-citizens as “isolated perverts.” Kaprow’s performance and the piers were adjacent happenings that presented only a shade of the whole; the blue light of the bathhouse offered a glimpse of utopia.

5 Dean, Dual Power Redux, 115
6 Munoz, Cruising Utopia, 52
According to Muñoz, queerness in its utopian manifestations promises a human that is not yet here, a move that resembles Dean and Canetti’s figuring of the crowd as a manifestation that promises a subjectivity that is not yet here.

Muñoz offers the gesture as a way of subverting capitalism and heteronormativity’s demands of reproduction and progress, saying that gesture “signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude.” As our bodies are ever more regimented in the service of abstract productive forces, and we are expected to constantly be working through social media, the refusal to act or to fulfill the logical next step in a movement renders gesture an annoyance to the demands of production and progress. Through Muñoz, we might think of gesture as marking a kind of queer temporal logic and lack of productivity that challenges straight time’s logic of efficiency. Leaving aside for a moment political economic terms around ideas of non-productive labor, this refusal to produce offers another way of thinking of our bodies existing together and within/around each other. If movements that stay in the realm of gesture refuse productivity, taken from a collective body, these gestures might represent a way of conceptualizing the body as a mass that fails to fulfill the machinations of capitalist production.

III

In many ways the work presented in the Hunter Thesis exhibition are attempts at thinking out loud around these ideas. Over the course of a month, I invited friends,
collaborators and fellow students to sit in my studio in front of a camera for ten minutes. In a sort of improvisational way, we shot individual videos of isolated subjects lying on the floor. In a nod to my fascination with pastoral images that somehow manage to step away from the pastorals insistence on de-differentiation, I instructed those sitting to base their stance on the pose of two models in a Diane Arbus photo of a nudist family sitting in a field. Fragmented close-up shots of these individuals, dispersed within footage of fields of flowers, played on a loop, make up the tapestry of projected images that form a larger collective subject in the video installation. Latex sheets are sewn onto each other and the wall, their materiality referencing the images they hold. The images of bodies and flowers fall in and out of recognizability, with the boundaries between both individual human bodies and the larger scene merging and breaking down. There is no narrative arch to the video installation, in fact there is no “action” outside of the slightest movements and gestures, signaling Munoz’ desire to refuse a kind of finitude through a queer gesture.

On the gallery floor stands a paraffin wax coated sculpture. The sculpture approximates the scale of a human, or possibly a small group of humans. Four grey pillars fall into a collective pink and orange dome-like top. Like the latex in the video, the lumpy wax (a material that paradoxically points to natural and industrial systems) makes direct reference to the body. The amorphous form sometimes suggests a torso, a hip, an arm wrapping around the base of the dome, but never quite lands on representation of the human.

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Both the video installation and the sculpture attempted in very direct ways to refigure the body as a collective, a conglomeration of many that create a multitude, in order to create a gap from which we might imagine other potentialities outside of the individual, atomized and alone. This attempt at forming a different type of crowd and a collective subjectivity (however fleeting and inadequate) stems from a desire for something other than capitalist realism and stuck categories. A desire for us, a queer and communist desire.
Bibliography


Image List

Figure I: Installation View, *Untitled*, dimensions variable, plaster, chicken wire, burlap, pigment, paraffin wax.

Figure II: Detail, *Untitled*.

Figure III: Installation View, *Untitled*.

Figure IV: Installation View, *Untitled*, dimensions variable, wire, latex, video projection.

Figure V: Detail, *Untitled*. 