

A body of works or bodies that scatter in concert

On the production of "vulner-ability" in the works of Aimée Zito Lema

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Looking at the works Aimée Zito Lema has been producing over last several years, one of the first questions that come to my mind, **where does she find all this warmth towards people?** In her work people are most often at the center, people are often the subject of the works, and moreover it's people who often make the work. And they are seen with such warmth and care. Simultaneously I also come to ask like, does she do so in a manner that an accelerationist would feel allergic to, namely by doing what he calls "folks aesthetics" that is blindly benevolent to people and believe in horizontal (or ever flat) local, grassroots movement? Or that a post-humanist finds uncritically anthro-centric, having no clue of the state of the planet we live today? By entering a constellation of Zito Lema's practice made of a loose and open ensemble of things that she has been making with her families, friends, children, (former) factory workers, domestic workers, cleaners, patients or other fragile audiences, or the living ghosts in recent pasts, however, one may find that such questions are irrelevant, not to say right or wrong or good or bad. The irrelevance is not because a political urgency does not matter, desire to hasten not exists, the need for strategizing is not recognized. Instead there's such an unyielding position, as if never questioned or as if inherited, **that a way to move forwards is always with others.** That non-human seems not to matter is not because it believes only in human agency of progression. After all it is this human being that should change from the way it had acted, and it's also them that contains non-humanness (no more binary between human and animal). Still a question lingers to me, **where does she find all this warmth towards people?**

I see curiously how the areas of Aimée Zito Lema's ongoing interests, be politics, memory, work, cooperation, often come and be addressed with an intimate observation of "body" or coupled with a matter of body. People are not seen as people of individual personalities or characters. Rather people are the bodies of this and that. Bodies that work and make together as in the workshop **Zitten is een werkwoord / Sitting is a Verb** (2010 - ongoing), bodies that that dance and protest in the performance and video installation **Rode de Jambe** (2015), bodies that think, rest, gaze as in the film **Other Places/Otro Lugares** (2012) protest. It's bodies that assemble and makes moments of actions and movement.

These bodies are neither the ones of great will and intentionality nor matters/materials themselves. *Sitting is a Verb* (2010 - ongoing) lead us to an buzzing scene filled with elements of woods and different zones of different scales where people are immersed in the process of assembling and constructing to make the Rietveld Crater Chair. Originally it took place in the workers re-claimed cooperative factory IMPA in Buenos Aires in post economic crisis of Argentina. The chair-making was to reclaim the initial idea of the Rietveld Crate Chair of being one of Rietveld's many explicitly copy free designs from the its high design status, and to repurpose them for the workers initiated educational infrastructure the University of the Workers which lacked some basic facilities. Later on, the workshop were repeated by art institutions such as Casco in Utrecht, the Netherlands – where I work as the director –and the East Side Project in Birmingham, in relation to their investigative projects about alternative economies. Whether you are onlookers or participating makers-workers in these workshops, what is one of the most powerful experiences is the experience of becoming manual laborers or even some kind of machines of making chairs in relation to another in acquiring skills and assembling different pieces of a chair to be together. Your mind gets open, your head free, and you be there as part of the collectively assembly line. Additionally there's self-made spectacle from a chair whose only final objectness on display is familiar to our eyes coming to being, being made available, and get multiplied. **As the title of the work says, 'sitting' here as both noun and object becomes a verb: and I would like to add, a verb without an individual subject.** There comes a joy, and indiscriminate affection.

The bodies that are captured in ***Rond de Jambe* (2015)** are not so different from this. Shown in the installation of multi channel film projection, **the images alternately show and superimpose at a moment the movement of ballet dancers and protesters both in groups.** Ballet dancers belong to the contemporary. They are in a typical ballet class but also present specific movements that resemble the movements of some of protesters from what looks like the documentary film some decades ago. Indeed the film comes from late 1970s/mid 1980's the period in which neighbors and activists demonstrated against the construction of the National Opera and Ballet building in the old Jewish area in Amsterdam, claiming for the non-elite space for social purposes and houses. Protesters stand next to the construction site and push the fence off. The pushing body is repeated in a dance form by ballet dancers. The crane continues to move. The baller dancers repeat their basic exercise, a circular movement of their legs called "ronde de jambe". The images do not share a narrative of how what must have been long, draining

process of struggle unfolded. Hence are no names of anyone. Instead they confront us the movements of bodies, demonstrating bodies and dancing bodies: their differences are woven and layered on top of each other, as different strands of time they belong to. When *Rond de Jambe* was presented in a form of performance by both professional ballet dancers of different generations and audiences who spontaneously took part, next to the film installation, during the Open Studio of Rijksacademie in Amsterdam, various bodies in ensemble augment these strands and layers to a degree of transformation of all of these into **sheer energy, a temporary collective empowerment**. While everyone's movement are somewhat different from each other, no one singles out and everyone in tune with each other.

Yet "**vulnerability**", that's what I see in this ecstatic moment, as in when the chairs are being assembled. With no status or no confidence, one is drawn to this collective movement (or moment). It's not that they are weak subjects that need protection. Certainly they are not just categorical precariats that a government watches out either. However, as I advance my argument, they are still vulnerable and the recognition or rather the sensibility of it makes it possible the warmth whose "source" I sought after, as in turn such warmth is a source for solidarity. Now this vulnerability has to be distinguished from any popular notion of it.

By language, Judith Butler in her gives a support here. Butler, in her 2015 book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* warm feeling for what some of leftists bash as non-articulate, disastrous movement, many recent assemblies from Arab spring to Occupy, - perhaps we also should include the one that occurred in different names such as Sunflower movement in Taiwan or Umbrella in Hongkong - seems to strive for how further these assemblies move on, with the articulation of meaning of body-assemblies. While assemblies on the streets and squares where a mass of bodies are exposed to public eyes might seem to argue for bodies as the means and end of politics in time of precarity that threat bodies, through loosing works, salary cuts, losing housing, pubic benefits, Butler argues it's important to recognize that bodies are not the sole actors here but have to be understood "**in terms of its supporting networks of relations.**" What she means is that **bodies** are not simply active or inactive, but actually as they gather in crumbling infrastructures and in arm with another, they manifest their dependency in those supporting structures be environment, social relations and network of support and sustenance that across the human, animal and technical divides. In light of this, bodies as the condition for solidarity appear to be vulnerable due to its dependency on others. It's not to objectively define

human being but the condition of our vulnerability is not changeable. What this understanding of body ultimately does, as Butler call for is it is "enacting the world we wish to see, while making a demand. This enactment and performativity is precious otherwise we would permanently suspend our life until we arrive at the end (unknowable timing of destination!). Political movement deprived of life, we might want to avoid it, as histories of revolutionary failures also teach us.¹

For this positionality, Aimée Zito Lema's own work offer the clarity. **Several Forms of Friendship** (2015) consist of the casted part of bodies of the artist's family members and friends, especially the joint areas such as elbow, fingers, knee and feet and the growing collections of images that the artist took from various magazines showing particular yet ambiguous bodily gestures in black and white photographs in ensemble in a frame or sometimes in a paper drape. What commons to all these elements as well as the way they are present together are their being fragments, moments, and fragile. In case of the casts, they are "complete" by the artist's 3 years old daughter. The fragile objects as the castes are left to the touch of her daughter adding clays around them.

"The friend is not an other I. but an otherness immanent to selfness, a becoming other of the self. The point at which I perceive my existence as sweet, my sensation goes through a con-senting which dislocates and deports my sensation toward the friend, toward the other self Friendship is this desubjectification at the very heart of the most intimate sensation of the self." ("The Friend", from *What is An Apparatus*, pp. 34-35)

A passage came to my mind from a short essay by Giorgio Agamben where he attempts to decipher an equivocal phrase from Aristotle "O friends, there are no friends." in making friendship as the constitution of the political. Now in sensing of Aimée Zito Lema's work through body and its vulnerability, it occurs to me that Agamben was missing the bodily dimension in his otherwise great ontology of friendship not of sharing something (birth, law, place, taste) but the experience or sensation of being that is sharing. The images of bodies partial, fragmented and fragile yet in ensemble that Aimée Zito Lema forms here again together with people, here with her mother and

¹ Although known through the conversation with the artist, it's meaningful to note that the as the artist learnt the "protagonist" of the main gesture in the work got depressed by its gesture being the center of attention, and identified and attributed to him either heroic or a failure. The body was singled out from the assembly and subjectified, that led to the sense of impasse.

daughter, sister, friends and the anonymous from the printed media, becomes the perfect vivid image of our being always shared, that Butler says as the unchangeable condition our vulnerability. Certainly this being includes a desk, wooden racks or frames for holding and supporting them together.

Body at Work – Rehearsing Cooperation (2014) is the title of a project installation which has resulted from a series of workshops and collaborative works that the artist organised over the course of a year as part of her “Artist at Work” period at Casco. Not unlike other works, it also comprises several works, which scatter around in a room but are put in relation to one another. Not that they are already sharing something but the experience of being shared assumes a dimension as well as a possibility of friendship, or solidarity: DIY kit of aprons made by Workers Cooperative Acetatos Argentinos in Argentina, second hand clothes donated by friends, a net woven from them by children of former cooperative factory workers of De Ploeg (Weverij de Ploeg) in the Netherlands, the Rietveld Crate Chairs and tables by many participants in a playground that anticipates the lay-offs and reorganization by budget cuts, and cooperating architects, fashion designers, graphic designers and art organizations... (and parents and children, building and gestures, bodies and structure, now and then). None of them appearing as individual subjects of power, they, as “bodies at work” nevertheless come and manifest how we co-exist and move in common, without being united or be the one who can. Being vulnerable as we understand it as our condition becomes an ability. That’s where is the secret of Aimée Zito Lema’s warmth – affirmative politics, that’s we all need for embracing differences², sustaining and empowering all our possible agonistic struggles.

² For further study on this notion, I would like to recommend the reading of some of writings by Kathrin Thiele such as “Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics” (2014), published in Parallax, Vol 20, no. 3, pp. 202-216.