

DIS-ORGANIZATION: Sweet and Tender Collaborations and the Possibilities of Loosely Coordinated Group Action

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by Tommy Noonan

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Sweet and Tender Collaborations began with a conversation in 2006, when a number of artists from a number of countries, present for the ImPulsTanz festival in Vienna, began to discuss the difficulties that we as individual artists face. We spoke of difficulties in finding time, space and money to work, and the difficulties in finding meaningful opportunities to exchange and grow artistically. In this conversation, we also realized how easy it would be, given the recent social networking revolution, to form a community of support, and to act and communicate quickly and efficiently. We began to ask ourselves: what exactly could a network give us as individual artists? How would we and could we each use such a network to create the conditions we desired as individuals?

What grew out of these questions was Sweet and Tender Collaborations – not a fixed form, but a continually evolving experiment in progress. The network itself is little more than a collection of varied individuals with no central structure of support. There is no consensus on what it is. There is no center and no one can speak for it as a whole. There is only a continuing discussion, and what I would call, uncontrolled, emergent behavior in the form of various projects. This presentation itself is only a personal interpretation of its activities, for it is above all an experiment and a work-in-progress between artists.

In 2006, various projects and exchanges were launched between artists under the title Sweet and Tender Collaborations; Portugal, Berlin, Greece and Belgrade were a few of the locations. In 2007, the network partnered with SKITe association in France to create



The Sweet & Tender website - www.sweetandtender.org

a residency of 30 artists in Jan Ritsema's space: Performing Arts Forum. Since then, we have dispersed and re-organized, creating more exchanges in Portugal, France, Germany, Spain, Norway and Mexico.

Markets, Institutions and Open Spaces

To begin, the conversation of Sweet and Tender came with an agreement that we as artists desired several things in order to learn and grow and to produce work. We desired time, space and money. An opening of space, in the abstract sense, is done with the help of whatever resources we as individuals can win, negotiate, apply for, discover, steal or invent ourselves. We as artists need space, and we as artists have, from time to time, and depending on our location and our economic conditions, greater or fewer resources with which we can open different forms of space.

We also agreed that most of us live in a system of market forces, which have an effect on how much or little our work is sustained. We know this well, as many of us spend more time complaining about 'The Market' than we do actually making work. Forces of supply and demand, which put pressure on us to deliver particular kinds of products in particular kinds of conditions, are often in conflict with our artistic interests. In other words, the production of innovative work requires much more time and space than the market would consider a good investment.

True this may be, but first we should stop complaining. When we complain about the market, implicit in our complaint is the idea that we as artists deserve to operate beyond such forces. The reality is that we don't have any such inherent privilege. This idea that the artist is special – that he or she automatically occupies a position outside the normal codes of capitalist organization – is a construct directly tied to capitalism itself. In communist organization, for example, the act of making art is simply labor, just as is the act of making shoes or heavy machinery. Whatever illusions we may have about being 'special' are simply proper to a capitalist context, and although making work in a context determined by codes of production and exchange will produce art that is generally safer and less innovative, simply whining about Capitalism won't get us anywhere.

The standard counter-proposal to the problem of the market has been the institutional sheltering of culture from those market forces that see cultural value in purely monetary terms. Such protection often takes the form of state subsidies (and is most widely implemented in western Europe). This is a welcome step towards recognizing the importance of culture in general. Yet a heavily subsidized system can produce not only laziness and inaction in individuals, but also just as much selfish behavior and isolation as environments dominated by production demands.

Furthermore, simple institutional protection from the market does not necessarily allow us real dynamic spaces for exchange and development either. The acceptance of 'Research' or 'Lab' spaces as an integral part of performance-making processes, has been more or less supported by institutions in Europe for the past 15 years. This has been an outgrowth of the necessity for contemporary dance artists to find ways to protect themselves from market forces, which were perceived to be threatening European contemporary dance in the mid 1990's. One result of this period was a wide-scale articulation for 'Research' as necessary to the dance-making process, and the need of its inclusion into institutional practice. Research space and time became something provided and determined by institutions.

The problem here is that such a space of 'Research', though thankfully upheld by institutions, has also institutionalized notions of work, process and research itself; such practices become homogenized by policies that determine what and where



is open space, and more or less how 'Research' itself takes place and is defined. These are situations in which artists still do not take the initiative to connect directly to one-another.

Failure is an Asset

Another way in which institutional space can become limiting has to do with their relationship to failure. Whether they are profit-driven or not, institutions are by their very nature, always concerned with their own survival, and must therefore exert a kind of control over the "open" spaces they protect. It is this concern which forces them to make calculations in reference to a given

status quo, in order to justify and ensure the continuation of their own existence, either by being profitable, or in deserving the continuation of their subsidy. Failure is something that must be minimized by institutions because, even if an institution is not-for-profit, it endangers its own survival if it invests resources in an endeavor that will likely produce a large amount of failure. Even when taking risks, institutions are forced to calculate a situation in which they do not produce more than a certain amount of failure. It is this concern which forces them to see failure as a liability and not a possible asset.

In his book: *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirkey discusses the Open Source movement, and its competitive threat to large institutions such as Microsoft. Shirkey argues that it is not because the Open Source movement (in which software is collectively developed by an online community of programmers) consistently develops a body of competitive or even worthwhile programs. In fact, roughly 75% of open source software is considered completely worthless and is never used, while 10-13% is considered somewhat useful, getting a few downloads per day. It is because the Open Source movement has a different relationship to failure than does an institution. In general, only the top 2% of open-source projects are considered successful. Yet it is this wildly innovative 2% that offers a real threat to institutions such as Microsoft in pushing forward the development of the software industry.

In this way, the ability for a community of loosely coordinated programmers to work together in a large mass renders the conflict of failure irrelevant. Since there is no emphasis on being productive, there is not an institutional cost to failure, and trying things is easy; there are many attempts, and a great amount of worthless material is produced. Yet the tolerance for that level of failure makes possible the 2% of material that is truly revolutionary, and might never have been produced under institutional conditions. Here, the ability to tolerate large amounts of failure is an asset.

In all honesty, most of the critics of Sweet and Tender have leveled that gatherings in the past years have resembled something of a summer-camp, having insufficient drive and focus, and are not adequately concerned with controlling the quality and exchange of output. 'Where is the quality control?' many ask.

I would agree. Most of what comes out of those meetings should, according to my standards, never be presented on stage. But aside from the fact that creating quality work is not the direct point of the project, I would say two things: first, there has been about 2% of the material produced from Sweet and Tender meetings that has eventually gone on to be quite successful, to tour, and to be considered innovative. And second: often times in the field of art, failure also contains a lot of useful educational value. Certain meetings, conversations, ideas and exchanges might never have been worthy of 'investment' by institutions. They provide no direct, quantifiable or visible return. Yet in our field of work, these experiences of failure are often the seeds of future developments, which gain real cultural and even market value.

Thus a situation in which failure is not avoided but rather integrated into the process of exchange and development, is in fact a better long-term investment in the development of culture in general, and the creation of space is most dynamic and revolutionary when artists are active in creating it and its frame, rather than hoping it will be designed and protected for them.

Change in Thinking

So what is at the heart of this Sweet and Tender project, or other such similar initiatives? Primary to the project is the reorganization of the traditional relationship between artist and institution. Institutions are not bad, oppressive or irrelevant in the production of art, and neither are markets. There will remain. Yet they can be more actively and creatively utilized by us, the artists. And of course there must also be a change in how we as individuals and we as institutionalized societies think about culture in general.

I propose that we artists give up thinking in revolutionary terms. Instead of thinking: 'how do we overturn or escape the tyranny of market forces?' How do we create better institutions?' We instead should work together and within systems as they exist, to carve out spaces inside of them, spaces in which we may define work and interaction ourselves – what Hakim Bey calls the "Temporary Autonomous Zone".

These spaces do not attempt to overthrow, but instead create a dynamic and ever-shifting landscape of micro-communities and

creative intersections, which are driven and opened by artists themselves. We must think constructively, and we must think about what markets and institutions have to offer us. We must think more in terms of creating conditions for ourselves, in which we have more control over how we relate to markets. We must think creatively, wildly, with a mix of awareness and idealistic naivety – but also with a sense of radical, impossible vision. I believe that always looking for opportunities in this way of acting benefits artists and institutions, as well as any cultural scene in the long term.

So this is the question at the heart of the Sweet and Tender conversation, and it also perhaps the first question to put forward here: how can artists work together to create conditions in which we are not wishing to escape from the market, and are not relying only on existing structures as the sole provider for our time, space and money? How can we as artists utilize the productive and creative power that market systems create for each of us, while resisting the urge to fall into a competitive environment of art production? How can we be active in our relationship to the structures of production as they currently exist? What can we do towards creating Temporary Autonomous Zones?

The Principle of Generosity

The first principle I will put forward, which is central to the operation of our network, is the very simple principle of generosity. It is the idea that artists themselves can be very generous, and can create spaces – spaces of education, information exchange, research, visibility, production, even couch-surfing. This may sound obvious, but I find that all too often we as artists tend to look up towards the structures of production, whether these have a coherent policy or not. We think of theaters, subsidies, grants and competitions as the only route towards gathering the necessary resources of time, space and money, and the only actors capable of developing our careers and creating a lively scene.

In fact, each of us can already be said to have a certain amount of resources within our influence: a studio, a festival, a grant or some extra money. We always desire access to more resources, but if we think of being generous with the resources we have, instead of thinking of only that which we need, we create a culture in which more options open to each of us. A greater number of spaces

opens on a horizontal plane of multiple, interconnected actors, than does on a vertical or hierarchical plane. Simply, whenever we as individuals come across the opportunity to open a space for ourselves, it is almost always possible to open that space a little more for the benefit of someone else.

It is not something that can really be quantified, but it does produce dynamic learning environments, different possibilities for work, discourse and knowledge. It is not usually a short term investment, but rather something more long-term in its rewards. Also, it is important to remember that everyone has something to give. Even if it is not space or money or even ideas, perhaps its labor and experience, a book, a film – everyone can open a space for someone else.

Finally, it is important to note that these principals are not about creating something new. Sweet and Tender is not a revolution aimed at creating a better system. It is an option for personal interaction between artists themselves, as well as between artists and institutions.

Decentralized Collectivity

The possibility to employ simple, user-operated systems for communication, makes the building of networks easier and quicker. Databases of information can be shared between artists – the exchanging of knowledge, information and contacts. When this exchange is based on real collaborative relationships, as it is with Sweet and Tender, then this powerful flow of knowledge can open possibilities for collaboration in real time and space.

By this point, everyone knows that with a good internet connection, masses of people can exchange knowledge and information easily today; entire communities can form and dissolve online, and certain collective notions of a ‘we’ can amass along disparate points of a decentralized network. Most importantly the cost-to-benefit ration of mass coordination has dramatically changed, and individuals in various contexts can move to coordinated action from various points along a network, when before such action could only have been made possible by institutions. Pure mass in numbers becomes a tool without the need of a common artistic identity. A local artist who is engaged with such a sprawling network of individuals, immediately becomes an empowered asset to local institutions through his

or her connectedness. Things become possible with the simple appearance of a coordinated aggregate mass.

Of course many types of networks exist today in the performance world. Many institutions have begun to network in order to increase possibilities for co-production and to distribute and multiply funds and information. However, the model of Sweet and Tender is both informal in nature, entirely artist-driven, and based on actual artistic relationships. It is open to anyone, but only through developing artistic relationships with any of the artists involved. In this way, it is neither a company of people organized around place, nor is it a cyber-community that exists in a virtual space; it is instead an embedded and intertwined virtual and real social community.

If we look to organize artist networks around user-built and peer-to-peer structures, what we can begin to see is what Tomislav Medak describes as a ‘third-way’ of social organization. This is a flat hierarchy of exchange and individual action that still emphasizes collectivity and collaboration – a system in which the line between producer and consumer of culture is no longer so clear. All involved are players in active exchange.

Several things are important to this philosophy, but chief among them is that of structural lightness and informality. The network of Sweet and Tender is not intended to be an engine for the production of work. It is not meant to be a thing separate from the users that compose it. It is not an entity or a legal body. It has no fixed codes of operation or procedure. Many systems and codes arise with each new project. The artists that create a meeting point in Portugal create a different Sweet and Tender Collaboration from the one I will create in Germany, different from the one that Marko Milic creates in Belgrade, from Montserrat Payro in Mexico City, from Tim Darbyshire in Australia. Sweet and Tender exists only as a cluster, a grouping of these individual moments and communities. There is no center that grows extremities, only extremities themselves, which find use value in connecting with one-another. Herein, a center is formed, but not owned.

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