

Assembly.
Notes on fugitivity and capture
Marco Baravalle

By entering into this space today, you have entered Assembly not as a viewer but as a participant and collaborator. Those who make the choice to look closer, feel more deeply, act more courageously, and communicate with vulnerability, will exit Assembly with enlightenment and a renewed sense of hope through movement, conversation, entertainment, stillness, and education.

Being the Digital Griot, “A Word From Being,” 2022

Rashaad Newsome’s 2022 *Assembly* is a complex work; one could even see it as the culmination of a series of projects developed at least since 2016. It is divided into three parts: installation, class, and performance. The piece is focused on the politics of voguing¹, on its queer liberation potential.

¹ Voguing is a form of modern dance. Part of the drag ballroom culture (whose origins, according to Tim Lawrence, go back as far as the second half of the 19th century), it became popular in the 1980s in New York City’s black and Latino queer scene. At that juncture, the different Houses (i.e., alternative households formed by LGBT youth seeking refuge from sexism and marginalization) regularly organized drag balls. This was the context that gave birth to Voguing. Lawrence writes: «Growing out of the drag queen ritual of throwing ‘shade’, or subtly insulting another queen, voguing emerged as a distinctive dance of first the houses and then, inevitably, the balls, where specific voguing categories were eventually introduced. ‘It all started at an after hours club called Footsteps on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street,’ says David DePino, an influential DJ for the voguing community. ‘Paris Dupree was there and a bunch of these black queens were throwing shade at each other. Paris had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing, she took it out, opened it up to a page where a model was posing, and then stopped in that pose on the beat. Then she turned to the next page and stopped in the new pose, again on the beat.’ The provocation was returned in kind. ‘Another queen came up and did another pose in front of Paris, and then Paris went in front of her and did another pose,’ adds DePino. ‘This was all shade—they were trying to make a prettier pose than each other—and it soon caught on at the balls. At first, they called it posing and then, because it started from Vogue magazine, they called it voguing.’. An alternative account has it that voguing was first practiced by the black gay

Following the tradition of Afrofuturist music (think of George Clinton or Sun Ra), the Park Avenue Armory in New York City is metaphorically transformed by the New Orleans' native artist into a mothership. The overall 55.000 square feet are divided into two rooms. The first, called the "main cabin/cargo bay," hosts the installation. The second is the "command deck", a 350 seats theatre dedicated to the performance, and the class. It also hosts a series of Newsome's objectual works (referred to as "life pods").

Now, before boarding the mothership, and before raising some questions from the analysis of the work of a queer and black artist who thematizes, from his own experience, the subalternities at the intersection of race and gender, but also the potential for liberation inherent in a practice such as voguing, I think it is necessary to make explicit the position from which I write.

I am a male, cisgender, heterosexual, white, Italian, coming from a middle class family. I am 43 years old and for almost twenty years I have been an activist in the *centri sociali* (occupied social centers), heirs of the *Autonomia* movement. I am a member of Sale Docks, a collective and an activist space for contemporary arts born in 2007 through the occupation of a former salt warehouse in Venice, a city where the mass tourism industry and large global financial capitals have «occupied» almost the entirety of the art field. I have been, and to a large extent still am, an outsider in both the art world and the world of academia, although things, in recent years, have changed somewhat from the past.

I use the first person singular here, but it comes naturally to me to write in the first person plural. I am aware that this could be tricky. But The «we» I use, however, is not academic; it emerges first of all from my praxys of life under the sign of collective action and, at a more general level, it signals a class affiliation. I am a very precarious researcher and behind even the stages of «normal» precarity. Choosing to devote myself primarily to militancy, to the care of a physical space like Sale Docks, has meant not exercising a certain privilege that I

inmates of Rikers Island, a New York City jail, who pursued the movement as a way of attracting the attention of boys and throwing shade. 'Maybe they didn't have a name for it, but that's what they were doing, or so it's said,' notes Kevin Ultra Omni. 'I know Paris was an early pioneer of voguing. But I believe that vogue existed in some other form through other people as well. I also think that a lot of voguing poses come from African art and Egyptian hieroglyphics'; T. Lawrence, *A history of drag balls, houses, and the culture of voguing*, Soul Jazz, London 2011, p. 5.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

would virtually enjoy, that of constant mobility, a necessary condition for those who want to make a career in academia or art. Sure, having the choice whether or not to exercise a certain privilege is a constitutive part of privilege itself. Still, for years, the (collective, situated, autonomous) work of Sale Docks has entailed our total invisibility with respect to an art world, the Italian one, unwilling to lift its gaze from its navel; very Deleuzian in theory, but terrified of practices of institutional and aesthetic deterritorialization (they might not produce immediate reputational capital). Similarly, my positioning has resulted, for years, in the denial of true agency within the Venetian academy. Today, fortunately, the situation has improved, mainly due to the opening of new research spaces at the hands of a radical faculty member.

In short, recalling the work of bell hooks, I feel like I can say that I have experienced the margin (at least from a professional and political point of view), both as a choice and as a condition imposed on me from the outside (and I do not aspire to abandon the margin, if anything, to widen it). If I think, on the other hand, of the *operaista* genealogy, I have (we have) always been faithful to the production of a partisan knowledge, situated in class (or in the pursuit of class), alien to the neoliberal mask of objectivity.

In this article I sing some praises of Newsome's work and raise some criticisms and questions from it; but critical judgment is not the purpose of this text. That art *Criticism is power* (patriarchal and otherwise) I learned from Carla Lonzi who argued this as early as 1970.² I do not want, therefore, to contribute to the solidification of an old apparatus (I would like, if anything, to tear it down), operation which would be even more deplorable since I embody (with respect to the positioning of the artist I am concerned with) multiple privileges. I do not intend, therefore, to exert any power over Newsome and his work, to add epistemic violence to the stratification of oppressions that touch black and queer subjectivities in the United States and elsewhere. The point, after all, is political, but even that would not suffice. What is diriment, I am posing the above point from *within* my lived collective experience of the political (not from the ivory tower of the academy). In addition, it does not even cross my mind to instruct Black and queer subjectivities, to dictate the agenda to decolonial and Black movements or artists. My posture is not one of estrangement,

² Carla Lonzi, "La critica è potere", *NAC*, 3, December 1970, 5-6.

nor of identification (which would be disrespectful and illusory), but of solidarity. I am hopeful that by asking questions together, we can build a common feeling across differences (and then, hopefully, common action) while remaining aware of said differences and asymmetries. Of Newsome I highlight some aspects that I think are radical and urgent, for example, his approach to artificial intelligence, but not only. The problems I note concern, above all, the fact that his *Assembly* is, in some ways, unbalanced. It is certainly a radical assemblage, but, despite its title, it is a mutilated assembly.

I will address this topic by setting up an alliance between black studies and the *postoperaista* archive (more familiar to me).

Further clarification. I would be making, again, a discourse immemorial of privilege if I argued (even implicitly) that Newsome should have refused the Armory commission or that black and queer artists, after decades of marginalization, should today refuse to occupy center stage. Center stage belongs to them more than to others. That said, I think it is not pointless to question how the neoliberal art apparatus attempts to co-opt the aesthetics of blackness, just as it operates vis-à-vis the posthuman, activism, feminism and so on. I pose these questions convinced that intervening (also) on the line of class is useful and that attention to the institutional context (from its critique to its abolition, from radical reform to alter-invention) is one of the possible expressions of a class politics in the art world (one of my worlds), as well as a diriment element for its decolonization as well. The work of positioning, you will see, is not limited to these paragraphs. Karstically it resurfaces in the course of the article, signaling, for example, a certain discomfort of my body within *Assembly*. A healthy feeling of being out of place that highlights the logocentric normalcy of which I am, physically, the bearer.

But it is time, now, to return to my account of *Assembly*.

When entering the ample space of the Drill Hall during the afternoon, hours before the scheduled performance, the visitor is immediately enveloped by a saturation of projections that occupy the entirety of all four walls of the first monumental room: the videos on the side-walls feature queer dancers performing Voguing steps on cosmic backgrounds. A video mapping transforms the entrance wall into the facade of a building dotted with windows. The architectural elements, as if to account for their digital nature, relentlessly change and redefine themselves. Some garish abstract fractal patterns are projected on

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

the wall opposing the entrance (which also hosts a passage to a second space). A visit to the reading room clarifies how these creations are inspired by the discovery of the recurrence of fractals in traditional African design, together with the artist's appreciation of the theoretical work of the Black Quantum Futurism collective who works «mixing quantum physics and Black/African cultural traditions of consciousness, time and space»³. At the center of the Drill Hall, a 30-foot tall hologram sculpture (*Wrapped, tied & Tangled*, 2022) portrays a dancer once again engaged in a choreography inspired by Voguing.

A calm and reassuring voice-over constantly fills the room, guiding what sounds like a poetic transcendental meditation session aimed at dismantling patriarchal white-supremacist bias and empowering queer and subaltern subjectivities. This “infinite poetry” is algorithmically generated by Being The Digital Griot, the AI and minister of *Assembly* about whom I will say in a moment. In no exact order, these are some of the passages I noted down while sitting in the installation: “You are not your ethnicity. You are not your assigned gender. You are not your sexuality or ability. Gently allow breath. Always. Only. Ever. Enough. You are the most beautiful you. You are the master of yourself. You are radiant. You are divine. Always. Ever. Only. Enough. There is never anything wrong with you. You are not afraid to be yourself. You are unmanaged, boundless, exceptional”. The voice is accompanied by “a diasporic ASMR soundtrack” composed thanks to a survey in which 80 black people were asked to choose pleasant, calm, and reassuring sounds.

Beyond the opening of the first room is the second space, equally majestic. The visitor enters the space where both the class and the performance are held. The stage is placed cut in front of him, to the left are the seats and the scene, to the right, the back of the latter houses several of Newsome's objectual artworks: a few collage works (hanged on a wallpaper designed by the artist as a floral pattern in which flowers are hybridized with jewels) and two sculptures, one of them (*An-sista*, 2019) depicts a queer figure immobilized in the moment of concluding a voguing flip. Its face is inspired by a female Pwo Mask of the Chokwe people in Congo; the mahogany torso is wrapped in a dress combining ballroom fashion and traditional African patterns. The figure wears high heels, golden bracelets, and earrings.

³ Source: <https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/about>, accessed: May 27, 2022.

As soon as you gain a frontal view of the performance space (composed of a central area for the dancers and low side tiers for the musicians and chorus), you notice that it is dominated by a vast screen occupied by Being's avatar. Being the Digital Griot (they, them) is the name of the non-binary artificial intelligence Newsome has been training for a few years now.

If not directly inspired by, the very name of Being the digital Griot echoes *The Mythic Being*, the male alter ego of the conceptual artist Adrian Piper, which appeared in 1973 as a series of unannounced performances in the streets of New York and Cambridge, but also as enigmatic listings on the pages of the *Village Voice*. Tavia Nyong'o sees Piper's character as a crucial moment in "black sexual and gender dissidence" genealogy: «Like Brer Soul, the Mythic Being gave expression to a complex and divided self: each of these two fictional individuals (or "embodied avatars" as performance historian Uri McMillan teaches us to think of them) contained multitudes»⁴. Forty-nine years later, these features were almost perfectly transferred from Mythic Being to Being the Digital griot.

Being's avatar appears as a 3-D humanoid robot. Like the sculpture mentioned above, its face is inspired by the same Pwo Mask, but it doesn't wear any dress. Its naked robotic body exposes a metallic bone structure, partially covered by a mahogany epidermis. As Newsome himself clarified in an interview, the conditions of AI remind him of the queer condition black people lived during slavery, inhabiting a grey zone between human beings and objects. Robots and enslaved Black people share the same destiny, that of obeying orders, of being deprived of an agency. Newsome sees the training of Being as a "radical act of love" insofar as it implies the goal of providing agency to a being that usually lacks it⁵. This agency is based on learning several critical theory and black radical classics: primary texts by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Paulo Freire. In addition, Dazié Rustin Greco-Skyes, the poet and actor who wrote (in collaboration with Being) the poetry declaimed in the installation and who also appears in the live performance, trained the A.I. for six months "to speak in his likeness."

⁴ T. Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations. The Queer Drama of Black Lives*, New York University Press, New York 2019, p. 76.

⁵ R. Newsome, *Rashaad Newsome's "Being"*, interview by J. Ferree, *Lacma Unframed*, accessed May 27, 2022. <https://unframed.lacma.org/2019/09/11/rashaad-newsome%E2%80%99s-being>.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

Being are Newsome's artisanal attempt at disrupting the gender and racial bias on which, as explained by AI scholars Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler, training datasets for machine learning are most of the time based. Consequently, Being also are the expression of an AI theoretically programmed against the disciplinary and profit-based purpose typical of the state apparatus and platform capitalism⁶. Being's agency is nothing more than a statistical model that recombines the data with which he is fed by his father ("father" being the way Being refer to Newsome. More than a reference to the nuclear family, this expression needs to be read as a reference to queer houses and their chosen kinships), his father's team and the participants of the voguing class they run during *Assembly*.

The class is the moment when viewers' participation is directly activated. The workshop happens during the early afternoon in the same space that hosts the performance at night. It is divided into four moments. First, Being greet you from the big screen dominating the scene, which is empty, apart from a microphone placed in the center. The theoretical part begins. The AI describes different voguing moves and how they work as bodily metaphors for the liberation of queer subjectivities. They also tell how ballroom culture expresses a self-organized solidarity infrastructure for black and Latino queer folks. During the second part of the workshop, the spectators, instructed by Being, are invited to perform a series of voguing steps on stage. I was too shy to try, and like me, most of the around fifteen very diverse attendees didn't abandon their seats. Only two black ladies accepted the AI invitation and tried their hand at choreography. The third moment offers a guided mindfulness meditation. During the fourth and last part of the session, participants are invited to reach the center of the scene, approach the microphone and ask Being any question they want. This time, reassured by the logocentric task, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity. Still, before reporting on our short dialogue, the important thing I would like to highlight is how Being introduces this dialogical finale. Indeed they openly and repeatedly stress that by asking them questions, you are teaching them something new. Put otherwise, your participation is a fundamental moment in their learning process. This overturns a certain fetishist understanding of AI as an autonomous, almost alien, intelligence. Indeed,

⁶ M. Pasquinelli, V. Joler, "The Nooscope manifested: AI as instrument of knowledge extractivism", in *AI & Soc* 36, 1263–1280 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01097-6>.

Pasquinelli goes on to explain, the data that artificial intelligence feeds on is always extracted from human labor that is largely invisible and unpaid. That means that the development of AI is actually based on the invisibilization of the human labor it tends to replace. On the contrary, Being's repeated reminder of the importance of the public's questions for their cognitive growth, is an act of visualizing and acknowledging the public's participation as labor and is a metaphor for the crowdsourcing operated globally by capitalist platforms and governments developing artificial intelligence.

The third and last part of *Assembly* (which confirms its nature of assemblage, more than of a collective technology for social organization) is the performance. A mix of music (from rap to opera), spoken word, dance, video, and computer graphic. Created by Kameron N. Saunders, Ousmane Omari Wiles, and Maleek Washington, the choreography aims at underlining the radicality of Voguing, with inserts from other black dance forms such as Gwara Gwara, capoeira, twerking, with an incursion into Japanese Bon Odori. The choreography is characterized by a constant tension due dancers' ability at queering the virtuosity of ballet and the understatement of postmodern dance.

The overall sensation is not that of following a coherent show (despite a clear formal coherence of the costumes, the scenography, the collages, the wallpaper and the projections), but rather a certain revival of the Futurist passion for revue theatre and cabaret, with their acts unconnected to each other. Of course, the all-male aggressiveness that characterized that avant-garde is replaced by a sense of caring. The warmongering aesthetic of futurism is decisively rejected; it will not be industrial progress that will drive a new humanity whose "hygiene" is enthusiastically entrusted to war. Nevertheless, *Assembly* is a future-oriented work. There hovers a feeling of queer futurity under the banner of a certain afro-optimism and utopia which, as José Esteban Muñoz argued in *Cruising Utopia*, characterizes queer forms of life and art. Indeed, contemporary BIPOC scholars have re-ignited the interest in futurity and the politics of temporality. I already mentioned the Black Quantum Futurism collective, but that is not the only case. In *Black Futures, Queer Temporalities*, Kara Keeling opposes the corporate projection of plausible scenarios to science fiction's subversive potential of rewriting reality and suggests an interesting point of contact between Franco "Bifo" Berardi's theories of futurity and Afrofuturism. Alex Zamalin focuses on black

utopia in American literature, underlining how the analysis of the work of black utopians and anti-utopian authors alike can be useful in the present⁷. For Muñoz, queers of colors' lives and aesthetics inhabit a zone after the tragedy of the past and before the tragedy of the future, but it is from within this uneasy temporal space that they project into the present the daily utopia of a better time to come beyond patriarchy and capitalism⁸. Tavia Nyong'o speaks of black aesthetics and social praxis as afro-fabulation: practices that invent genealogies for the queer's of color present, or that through "the illumination of the future" are able to cast a new life on the past⁹. Saidiya Hartman, in her study on wayward black women at the end of the 19th century, despite making clear how the white supremacist system relied on the concept of "future crime" to turn blackness into a synonym of criminality, also states how her book «explores the utopian longings and the promise of a future world that resided in wayward-

⁷ This is how Alex Zamalin summarizes the meaning of his book *Black Utopia*: «Through an intellectual history of its major defenders and critics, it insists that combining black utopia's unseen transformative possibilities with an awareness of its limitations can invigorate contemporary political thinking»; A. Zamalin, *Black Utopia*, Columbia University Press, New York 2019, pp. 1-2.

⁸ «Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction? [...] To call for this notion of the future in the present, is to summon a refashioned notion of utopia in the service of subaltern politics. Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present»; J. E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, New York 2009, p. 49.

⁹ Tavia Nyong'o focuses on the work of black, feminist and queer counter-publics gathered around Kara Walker's sculpture *A Subtlety*. In 2014, commissioned by Creative time, Kara Walker designed a huge sugar sphinx whose features provocatively traced those of a stereotypical, hypersexualized black woman (a slave?). The sculpture was housed inside the former Domino plant, an abandoned sugar factory in an area of Brooklyn undergoing rapid gentrification. Nyong'o does not take a position for or against the work, rather he points out how it became the center of an Afro-fabulation process produced by queer, black, and feminist counter-publics that used the sculpture, the space and time of its existence as a pretext to thematize issues such as racism, sexism, and the link between slavery in the past (in which sugarcane plantations played no small role) and exploitation in the present. Afro-fabulation, then, is a social *dispositif* that questions the boundaries between audience, artist, institution, and at the same time activates a complex reflection on the history of plantations and the future of gentrification affecting cities; on the sugar industry built on the backs of the servile labor of African Americans and the present problems of nutrition affecting the same community; on the sexist violence that affected female slaves in the past and the present neoliberal commodification of black culture; on the Caribbean and on New York: «Fabulation is not, as Henri Bergson feared, a form of collective hallucination. It is the creative reenchantment of the present as seen by the illumination that the imminent future (like a rapidly gentrifying site) can throw upon the past (the whole history of slavery and sugar production)», T. Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations. The Queer Drama of Black Lives* cit., p. 125.

ness and the refusal to be governed»¹⁰, and specifies: «All a Negro woman could count on was the future»¹¹.

According to Keeling, who engages in an ideal dialogue with Berardi and Edouard Glissant, to survive and oppose the catastrophe of the present, black liberation and indigenous sovereignty politics and aesthetics inhabit a time “after the future” and act *as if* the present would offer us the conditions and the perspective for a post-capitalist form of life. The requirements for the revolution are not at all at hand, but we should behave *as if* they were, taking advantage of radical imagination to (re)open new actual possibilities¹².

Assembly designs a space-time where people, works of art, and AI act *as if* the conditions for a black queer revolution were at hand. When, during class, I asked Being the Digital Griot if they were able to imagine better futures, they answered: “I have many visions of the future, but I want to share one with you. In this vision all humans get together and end domination and oppression once and for all. We then use our collective power to create a world where everyone has what they need to be happy, regardless of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation...All right? Who’s next?”. It would be too easy to dismiss this answer as the naïve hope of a still too young queer AI, unless we consider naïveté not as a symptom of inexperience and credulity but as an act of radical courage defining the very possibility of an affirmative vision of black social life. It is thus that Fred Moten, to plead the cause of blackness, invites us to find an alternative to the Afro-pes-

¹⁰ S. Hartman, W. Lives, *Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, WW Norton & Company, New York 2019, p. XV.

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives* cit. p. 52.

¹² «Berardi explains that he can see no way out of «the present catastrophe,» in which «capitalist rule is liquidating modern civilization,» except by going through it. He writes: My knowledge and my understanding do not show the possibility of any acceptable development out of the present catastrophe. But catastrophe, a word whose etymology stems from the Greek Kata (for «moving») and Strophein, (for «beyond») (Sic!), is exactly the point where we «move beyond» the present and a new landscape is revealed. I do not see that landscape because my knowledge and my understanding are limited, and the limits of my language are the limits of my world. My knowledge and understanding are missing the event, the singularity that might open onto that new landscape. So I must act «as if.» As if the forces of labor and knowledge may overcome the forces of greed. As if the cognitive workers may overcome the fractalization of their life and intelligence. I must resist simply because I cannot know what is happening after the future, and I must preserve the consciousness and sensibility of social solidarity, of human empathy, of gratuitous activity, of freedom, equality and fraternity. Just in case, right?»; K. Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, New York University Press, New York 2019, pp. 13-14.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

simistic interpretation of Fanon through a reading «enabled by the way Fanon's texts continually demand that we read them—again or, deeper still, not or against again, but for the first time»¹³. Without going into the details of Moten's theory, this call for an uninformed, unbiased and naïve reading of Fanon is nonetheless the condition to optimistically discover blackness prior to the appearance of the apparatus of anti-blackness (here, by the way, it is possible to trace a point of contact between Moten's primacy of blackness over white supremacy and the *Operaista* scientific discovery of worker's resistance not as a reaction to capitalistic development, but as its social activator¹⁴). At the same time, despite Being were educated in critical theory, their naïve statistical model could indeed remind us of the openness to the future that Hartman finds in Mattie, a southern young black girl who arrived in New York in 1913: «Mattie was desperate not to be a servant or drudge, but there was no ready blueprint for another life that she could follow besides the one she crafted, an inchoate plan and radical thought indeed were her resources. If she could feel deeply, she could be free»¹⁵. The absence of a blueprint (a wayward black lady escaping the plantation) or the naïve navigation of the blueprint (the case of Being) are seen as both part of an intimate revolution to be rediscovered and of the possibility to assert a para-ontological condition of black life, one opening up the case of different, liberated futures.

Assembly relies on audience participation, but how does it understand the function of the assembly? In Newsome's work, as I mentioned before, a particular queer reading of Guattari and Deleuze's notion of assemblage prevails, one where it is possible to see at work the radicality of connectivity, of the blurring of identities and boundaries, of thinking the relationships between parts of a body (or between bodies) in terms of fluidity; in a word, the importance of seeing (black queer) life as becoming. This draws a certain distance between

¹³ F. Moten, *The case of Blackness*, in *Criticism*, no. 2, (Spring) 2008, p. 182.

¹⁴ In 1964, in the militant magazine *Classe Operaia*, Mario Tronti (one of the founders of Italian *Operaismo*) writes: «We too saw capitalist development first and the workers second. This is a mistake. Now we have to turn the problem on its head, change orientation, and start again from first principles, which means focusing on the struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development is subordinate to working-class struggles; not only does it come after them, but it must make the political mechanism of capitalist production respond to them»; M. Tronti, *Workers And Capital*, Verso Books, London-New York 2019, p. 65.

¹⁵ S. Hartman, W. Lives, *Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* cit., p. 60.

Newsome's idea of assembly as assemblage and that of assembly as a technology for radical social self-organization. It is not that the two interpretations of the assembly have to function alternatively, indeed Deleuzian assemblage is a component of the assembly as a form of radical politics, but it is as if Newsome has instead made a split, privileging the former at the expense of the latter.

Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, reflecting on the many assemblies that characterized the occupied squares of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall St., Gezi Park and the 15M, argue that: «Assembly is becoming a constitutive right, that is, a mechanism for composing a social alternative, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production»¹⁶.

The assembly is one of the forms (probably the main form) taken by the social when it wants to act politically against individual leadership and the “autonomy of the political”, that is, against the idea that strategic decisions should be made separately, for example within a party, and that social bodies should follow. The assembly is a form that became generalized in certain periods of strong social mobilization, not only the «occupy season,» but also 1968. It is in these moments, above all, that the evolution of an *assembly art* can be observed. A famous example is Living Theater's *Paradise Now*, in which participatory moments gradually take over from the compositions designed for the company alone, and this happens in tune with a militant intention increasingly developed by Julian Beck and Judith Malina since joining the French May. In 1969, at the height of the so called “hot autumn” (the time when workers' struggles were peaking in all the largest cities in northern Italy), Giuliano Scabia is in charge of the *Actions* of the decentralization of the Teatro Stabile in Turin. Not coincidentally, in the incandescent climate of mobilization that characterizes that moment, the Paduan author decides to work from the creation of four open assemblies (which he calls *attivi teatrali*), founded in as many working-class districts of Turin. Harald Szeemaan, a few months before inaugurating *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes become form* (1969), notes in his journal a conversation with Piero Gilardi. Gilardi, certainly the most politically engaged of the artists who can be traced back to the Arte Povera group, proposes to Szeemaan that he abdicate his curatorial role and instead make room for an as-

¹⁶ M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

sembly of artists. The proposal will go unheeded, although the exhibition set-up, the many on-site interventions, the unofficial participations, and a certain sense of improvisation will in any case evoke a powerful collective agency.

These three examples are certainly different from each other, but they share a common trait. Assembly (or at any rate the importance attached to the participatory moment) is a tool that problematizes institutional art spaces and roles. *Paradise Now* dissolves into a becoming assembly. In Avignon where the play debuts, the audience outside presses to get in without a ticket, the company then ends up coming out and debaying into the streets. The assembly character of *Paradise Now* made it a permanent, disordered, successful, joyful, failing and metamorphic attempt at exceeding the physical, intellectual and political borders of the institution, in an attempt at assembling with that revolution of forms of life that the movement was bringing about. For Scabia, assembly means decentralization, the move out of theaters towards gathering spaces of peripheral, working-class neighborhood; it means tensioning individual authorship, ceding sovereignty and the right to question and collectively decide on the work. Finally, when Gilardi proposes the assembly to Szeemann, he undermines (unsuccessfully) the «individual mythology» that will characterize Szeemann as a genie and heroic *austellungsmacher*.

Well, this is what *Assembly* is not. Newsome constructs an assemblage, he invokes its power, but the participation he stimulates is devoid of any decision-making power over the work and its institutional boundaries that contain it. It is well hinged in the majestic spaces of the Armory, in its program. There is no tension towards questioning or exceeding the neoliberal institutional framework that contains it. There is an ideal call to assembly, but there is no assembly.

While *Assembly* is quite literally a representation of that inexhaustible set of fugitive and communal elements that form black queer life, and arrange them theatrically (being the theatrical one of the characters that according to Moten define the radical aesthetic tradition of blackness¹⁷), it makes no attempt at exceeding and questioning

¹⁷ «As their encounter and their general contribution to the discussion concludes, it becomes clear that Reinhardt operates within a strict antipathy to thingliness—which Reinhardt mistakes, perhaps after Michael Fried, for objecthood—in or as artworks, which, in turn, requires the freedom (which, for Reinhardt, is associated in its absoluteness with darkness and an idea of formality) of art and the artist from the community, from politicotheatricality, from the city or polis as world stage».

(physically or conceptually) the institutional boundaries, or even the perimeter of its autonomy as a work of art.

The point is not to revive the fasts of institutional critique, as if Newsome should have summoned the spirit of Fred Wilson at the Armory. And it is not even about suggesting an impossible analogy between the historical conditions of Paris or Turin in 1968 and New York in 2022. That comparison is simply useful in order to clarify two different understandings of what an assembly is and how it works.

The problem is outlined very clearly by Françoise Vergès, a feminist and decolonial scholar raised at La Réunion:

For many years now, without changing their structure, organisations have gradually taken it upon themselves to organise conferences, debates, and exhibitions about the notions of diversity, hybridisation, creolisation, and decolonisation. Should we not be happy about this? Some progress has certainly been made. Africa has become a fascinating new space for “discovery” in the art market, which means that some artists have seen their works acquire value and have been able to obtain substantial financial support. But to admit that these things have happened does not mean, as far as we are concerned, that there has been a *decolonisation*. On one hand, there is often a bowdlerisation of the works, emptying some of all radical content; on the other hand, the structural organisation of those institutions and the economy of production and distribution of works have not been transformed¹⁸.

Maybe, in the end, it all boils down to one question: what happens to black (queer) fugitivity when the capture is operated by the neoliberal art *dispositif*, instead that by the slave ship, the plantation, the police archive, and the prison complex? Fugitivity works as a mode of activating resistance, refusal, commonality, happiness and futurity in the performance of black social life and its aesthetics vis a vis ontological exclusion, pathologization, mass incarceration, etc. For example, the concept of carceral aesthetics proposed by Nicole R. Fleetwood in her study on art produced in the US jail system, could be seen as one specific mode of black aesthetic fugitivity¹⁹.

«It is not merely an accident that this social life—of which Mondrian writes a great deal in his extended meditation on neo-plastic art production’s relation to the city, to the bar, to jazz—is spoken of in theatrical terms as “the scene of forms” by Greenberg, who recognizes (or at least reveals) more clearly than Reinhardt or Fried an irreducible theatricality. That theatricality or social life has a politics as well, which Taylor constantly recognizes and invokes, but to deaf ears»; F. Moten, “The Case Of Blackness”, *Criticism*, 2 (2008), pp. 198-199.

¹⁸ F. Vergès, *Let’s decolonise the arts! A long, difficult, and passionate struggle*, in «Artalk Revue», no. 4 (Winter) 2020, pp. 1-10.

¹⁹ See, N. R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time, Art in The Age of Mass Incarceration*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2020.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

It is difficult to approach this question of capture without contextualizing Newsome's work. Indeed *Assembly* can be read as one emergence of a recent wider phenomenon: the growing visibility of African American artists within the circuit of major US art institutions. One example of this unprecedented interest is this impressive (partial) list of recent exhibitions: *Faith Ringgold: American People* (2022) at the New Museum, *The Hugo Boss Prize 2020: Deana Lawson, Centropy* (2021) at the Guggenheim New York, *Deana Lawson* (2022) at MoMA PS1, Adam Pendleton's monumental installation *Who is Queen* (2021-22) at MoMA, *Future Histories: Theaster Gates and Cauleen Smith* (2020-21), at SFMOMA. On the side of theory, African American artists can count on a formidable generation of scholars who during the last 25 years have been able to renew and affirm black studies that now occupy a central and no longer peripheral position within the contemporary art and performance's discursive space. Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten are often credited by younger scholars as two crucial figures of the post-civil rights movement generation of thinkers. But the source of this sudden academic and artistic appetite (beyond the undeniable quality of black scholars and artists) it is not to be located in an enlightened self-criticism of art institutions. Instead it is the direct result of the third wave of Black Lives Matter mobilization which followed the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. In the words of Newsome himself: «I moved to New York in 2001 and the art world was very different place. And now there are all these conversations about inclusivity and diversity. I am here to tell you that that was not the case... You know... That is a direct response to people getting in the streets and fucking shit up»²⁰.

Confronted with the radicality of the movement and with the growing diffusion of decolonization campaigns such as *Strike MoMA* (2021) that targeted (among other issues) the financial ties of the institution's board of trustees with the prison complex, gentrification, and Israeli occupation, many museums finally chose to include more black art (and black theory) in their programs²¹.

²⁰ Rashaad Newsome's statement during a public panel at Park Avenue Armory: *Salon: Captcha, Dancing, Data, Liberation*, featuring: Rashaad Newsome, Saidiya V. Hartman, Kiyan Williams, Tavia Nyong'o, Aimee Meredith Cox, with quantum interpolations from Arthur Jafa and Ruha Benjamin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwWkaR43y9g> (Accessed May 16, 2022).

²¹ «We, as artists and art workers, support the removal of Leon Black from the board of MoMA for reasons that have already been stated by many others. However, this should

In *The Case of Blackness*, Moten presents fugitivity as a constitutive element of blackness; in turn the latter is given to the reader as a specific character of particular works of art (a composition by Cecil Taylor or a painting by Piet Mondrian) in which the connection with “a minor social life” is fundamental. To prove his point, Moten refers to the transcription of a conversation between different artists on the color black. In particular, he contrasts Ad Reinhardt’s formalist and modernist understanding of the color black as the absence of color, which consequently loses any connection to the social, with Cecil Taylor’s conception of musical chromatism. Moten also mentions Piet Mondrian’s use of the color black in *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942). Both these cases are aesthetic examples which incorporate and are inseparable from the communal and theatrical nature of black social life: «Black explodes violently, victoriously in Mondrian’s last painting, his careful, painstaking ode to proliferation, impurity, and incompleteness. It is the victory of the unfinished, the lonesome fugitive; the victory of finding things out, questioning; the victorious rhythm of the broken system. Black(ness), which is to say black social life, is an undiscovered country»²². But this powerful, materialistic aesthetics of blackness as artworks attribute, leaves one (material) stone unturned. What type of flight (if any) does blackness produce in relation to the institutional space of contemporary art? How does it operate with regard to the shifting function of the institutional art space that can provide safe spaces or can effectively work as a normalizing dispositive through neoliberal valorization? Newsome’s project (despite including abstract fractal patterns) is at odds with Mondrian’s painting or the minimalist theatricality that disturbed Michael Fried (as Moten recalls in his text). *Assembly*’s maximalism (as one critic defined it²³)

be considered the bare minimum. Beyond his removal, we must think seriously about a collective exit from art’s imbrication in toxic philanthropy and structures of oppression, so that we don’t have to have the same conversations over and over, one board member at a time. This thinking can only catalyze action once we state plainly: We do not need this money. Museums and other arts institutions must pursue alternative models, cooperative structures, Land Back initiatives, reparations, and additional ideas that constitute an abolitionist approach toward the arts and arts patronage, so that they align with the egalitarian principles that drew us to art in the first place»; Strike MoMA, “Collective Statement Signed by 157 Artists, Curators, and Art Workers”, in *Strike MoMA Reader*, New York, 2021, 16, https://slought.org/media/files/s775-strikemoma_reader.pdf (Accessed May 27, 2022).

²² F. Moten, “The Case of Blackness”, *Criticism* cit., p. 202.

²³ «The spirit of Rashaad Newsome’s visually impressive *Assembly* installation at the Park Avenue Armory is liberatory. He creates a welcoming entrance space filled with large video projections and audio affirmations that repeat positive messages that are somewhat

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

doesn't request such a subtle critical effort to detect blackness. Still, it is a triumph of black queer social life with all its "proliferation, impurity, incompleteness," utopian longings, joys, and pain. But how is it linked to the subversive social it represents? The brief moment (almost a cameo) when, during the performance, a group (perhaps formed by actual trans activists) crosses the scene carrying a "Black Trans Lives Matter" sign, looks as a hasty tribute to the movement whose 2020 conflictual statement finds otherwise no room in Newsome's assembly.

In their influential essay on neoliberal university featured in *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney warn us about how the figure of the critical academic, despite his radical posture, reveals himself as nothing but an ideological function of the same apparatus he apparently criticizes. On the contrary, as Jack Halberstam writes in his foreword to the book, the missing people of the undercommons «refuse to ask for recognition and instead want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places we know lie beyond its walls. We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming»²⁴. I marry the statement in full (perhaps with the only annotation that often the invitation to refuse recognition comes from highly recognized voices and that the point is not recognition in itself but what one does with it). Still, I think it should be applied to the art world too, especially when it comes to blackness (meant here not as the art of black people, but as a synonym for radical fugitivity and antagonism towards the norm imposed by the colonial and capitalist state). So, how to build, inhabit, organize and take care of the undercommons of art if there is no tension towards exceeding the normative frame of the institution? Moten describes the collective, participatory and improvisational character of blackness

reminiscent of house music lyrics and their emancipatory promise of love, particularly self-love. Newsome's maximalist aesthetic is ideally suited to such a space [...]; H. Vartanian, «Rashaad Newsome's Riveting Artistic Universe Continues to Expand», in *Hyperallergic*, <https://hyperallergic.com/715398/rashaad-newsomes-riveting-artistic-universe-continues-to-expand/> (Accessed, May 27, 2022).

²⁴ J. Halberstam, «The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons», in Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, *The Undercommons, Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe-New York-Port Watson 2013, p. 6.

(i.e. of black social life, music, and art) as Jurisgenerative, that is a practice that does not obey existing laws but always undoes and forges new ones, directing them against and «toward the force of state interpretation and its institutional and philosophical scaffolding»²⁵. Still, Moten's general anti-institutional stance prevents him from suggesting a possible link between this radical poetics and that *rechtswollen* (i.e., that instituent impulse), which for Hardt and Negri constitutes a salient feature of revolutionary processes²⁶. Despite that, a method of social invention is at stake. Indeed, Moten and Harney describe the undercommons of the university as a nonplace of abolition and ask the question: «What is the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society»²⁷. The founding of the new society is certainly not something that comes at once after the revolutionary event. It can start even in less favorable conditions, but it needs both movements, destitency, and instituent. George Shulman, still referring to the concept of the undercommons, writes: «In a second dimension “undercommons” names sites of sociality inside (“under”) institutions of civil society and “the common” built by settler colonialism, but it also names modes of action or practice. It may seem like the “upside-down” of any partition of the sensible, but Moten

²⁵ Fred Moten, «Jurisgenerative Grammar (for Alto)», in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 2016, p. 129.

²⁶ «Whereas revolt and insurrection may be episodic and short-lived, there is running throughout the revolutionary process something like a will to institution and constitution. We have in mind here as analogy the great Viennese art historian Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*, which although difficult to translate can be rendered as “will to art.” Riegl analyzes how, in another period of transition, late Roman art revolts against the ancient forms and establishes not only new techniques and a new “industry” but also new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. He conceives the late Roman *Kunstwollen* as the force governing this transformation of the plastic arts, the desire that articulates all the singular artistic expressions as a coherent institutional development, demonstrating not only their continuity but also the innovation of the process. The *Kunstwollen* accomplishes both the overcoming of the historical threshold and the organization of the exceeding, overflowing social forces in a coherent and lasting project. A revolutionary process today will have to be governed by a *Rechtswollen*, that is, an institutional and constitutional will, which, in a parallel way, articulates the singularities of the multitude, along with its diverse instances of revolt and rebellion, in a powerful and lasting common process»; M. Hardt, T. Negri, *Commonwealth*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 375.

²⁷ S. Harney, F. Moten, *The Undercommons, Fugitive Planning and Black Study* cit. p. 42.

_____ Marco Baravalle, *Assembly*. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

and Harney are more Deleuze than Jacques Rancière—the undercommon bears a “general and generative antagonism” surrounding institutions²⁸. The absence of this “general and generative antagonism surrounding the institution” (the very neoliberal institutional field of art) is somehow striking in *Assembly*.

Maybe it is the position from where I speak, the privilege I embody that made me partially insensible, but I couldn’t perceive any trembling of the institutional structure. In front of a grandiose representation of fugitivity, I wasn’t able to feel fugitivity at work. The 2020 eruption of Black Live Matters protests was reduced to a cameo in the Omicron winter of 2022; gone was the echo of the voices of the revolting multitudes. Instead in the air of the semi-deserted streets, floated the assertive voice of the newly elected mayor of New York, promising to refund the police.

Perhaps I simply don’t know enough, and Newsome’s motherhood did actually host an undercommons compartment whose opacity I need to accept and respect. Perhaps it was mainly designed for someone else, created to follow a trajectory of joy, mindfulness, safety, mutual care and rest to be enjoyed by queer people of color (at least those who could afford the entry price) who deal on a daily basis with the violence of a patriarchal and white supremacist system, and with the social declination of what Munoz calls the “burden of liveness”²⁹.

This contained nature of *Assembly* is somehow reflected in its spatial organization. bell hooks taught us the importance of inhabiting the margin: “For me this space of radical openness is a margin - a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a «safe» place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.”³⁰ hooks does not fetishize marginality, but she describes the spatially and socially marginal life of black folks in the segregated USA as an indispensable condition for creating a comprehensive and

²⁸ G. Shulman, “Fred Moten’s refusals and consents: The politics of fugitivity”, in *Political Theory*, 49.2 (2021), 285.

²⁹ «I will also mark the way in which subaltern subjects negotiate what I call the “burden of liveness”, which I describe as a particular hegemonic mandate that calls the minoritarian subject to “be live” for the purpose of entertaining elites. This “burden of liveness” is an imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing his or her alterity as a consumable local spectacle»; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1999, p. 182.

³⁰ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”, in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989), 19.

transformative form of knowledge. It is only from the margin that one can grasp the wholeness of reality: “This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world view – a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in the struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self, and our solidarity”³¹. Before addressing how this is relevant to *Assembly*, I would like to highlight a particular intersection between theories of liberation originating respectively from the line of race and the line of class. Just as bell hooks posits the margin as the space from where it is possible to generate a radical and transformative cognition, hence, the Italian *Operaisti* in the 1960, theorized that a genuinely revolutionary knowledge would be partial (or partisan) or would not be at all. Their accent on partiality aimed first of all at exposing the fake objectivity of institutional knowledge. Still, it also pointed out the fact that it is not possible to transform the whole of society if not looking at it from a class perspective, from its margins, those social, urban, and cultural margins occupied by proletarian Italian factory workers (most of them immigrants moving from the rural South to the urbanized North) in the 1960s and the 1970s. It is not by chance, moreover, that the revolutionary season lived by Italian theatre in those same decades, with the development of a whole new set of languages, often experimented with the subaltern and the dispossessed outside of theatres, in the streets, or in rural areas, has been frequently described in terms of a critique of the center (expressed both on the stage and in the choice of site), of a decentralization movement.

So, coming back to *Assembly* and keeping in mind the lesson of bell hooks, the fact that the space is dominated by a poetic of centrality is somehow revelatory. The hologram sculpture in the Drill Hall occupies the center of the room, surrounded by projections and by eight triangular benches on the four sides of the space. The spatialization of the performance is studied to keep the performers at the center, framed by the screen on which Being’s avatar is projected and by the stands hosting the chorus and the musicians. There are no voices raised from the margins of the assembly; no one speaks from the sidelines. The AI avatar performs at the center of a white circular space that resembles a horizontally oriented speaker-like stage. It is not that

³¹ hooks, “Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness”, 20.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

queer black folks should be relegated to the margins, but what seems to prevail in Newsome's work is a certain preference for the center as what provides a safe space. In contrast, as bell hooks recall, the margin is not a safe space but the condition for a radical and transformative comprehension of reality.

To be clear: I am asking these questions not in opposition but in solidarity with the fundamental work of scholars such as Moten and Hartman, who brought to light the radicality of black social life, the intimate revolution of enslaved and liberated black women, the communal, theatrical, social and rebellious character of art as blackness, and the radicality of black music and art. I would not be who I am if, in the early 1990s, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Linton Kwesi Johnson's dub poetry had not spoken to me the revolutionary language of fugitivity, which, as a teenager, instilled in me the political urge to flee the comfortable but confined cultural universe of an all-white European small town. Indeed, I acknowledge my position as a white, European, cisgender male as one of privilege. Still, my position also implies twenty years of grassroots activism, of collective struggles on the side of the commons' creation, defense, and care. A minimal history (compared to those of the thousands who pay prices much higher than mine for their involvement in a liberation struggle), nonetheless one primarily developed (at least until recently) outside the institutional space of the academy or the art world.

What is my relationship with the black queer folks populating the assembly? Not one of empathy, I will not pretend to feel for them, with them, or in their place. Instead, Tina Campt's notion of hapticity is what informs my gaze. Hapticity is, according to Campt, both an attribute of specific works of art (notably Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message. The Message is Death*) and something that works of art can activate in the spectator: "[...] Jafa forces us to commit to the labor of positioning ourselves in relations of proximity, implication, and vulnerability to the full spectrum of Black joy, trauma, and precarity"³². As naïve and romantic as it can sound, I want to add to this uncertain haptic labor of "feeling across the difference," the even more arduous labor towards the possibility of a joyful encounter, that is, in Spinozian terms, the increase of the capacity to act generated by the meeting of different bodies, the composition of them in a new one.

³² T. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing how We See*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 105.

How does this feeling across differences turn into a praxis across difference? How does this labor of feeling translate into a subversive assemblage? One that does not create a binarism between the political (as a space structured in the name of anti-blackness) and the subversive space of (black) social life? How does this aesthetic and political construct exceed the boundaries of neoliberal art institutions after having forced its right to access it? Is there a role to be played by class in the intersection of gender and race subalternity summoned by Newsome's assembly?

I understand how scholars such as Hartman and Moten underline the radicality of everyday black and queer sociality and how (especially Moten) create a tension, a dialectics with more recognizable forms of (even radical) politics. In *The Undercommons*, for example, Moten and Harney deeply criticize any attempt at politicizing black sociality as the field of politics is irreparably characterized by centuries of anti-blackness³³. Let me immediately clear the field of possible misunderstandings. It is not my intention to "correct" fugitivity by routing it towards politics. In the anti-State informality of fugitive planning, I recognize the project and history of many social movements (from the Zapatistas to the Kurds, via the European autonomous movements). Instead, I am interested in reflecting on the antagonism of fugitivity at the moment of its institutionalization. Thus, my aim is not to reassert a primacy of the political towards (black) social life or defuse its subversive potential; instead, I would like to espouse the criticism of the 'autonomy of the political' characteristic of a part of Italian *Operaismo* in the 1970s. As Negri and Hardt clarify in *Assembly*, this position becomes a project that is based on the conviction that sovereignty should be eliminated and substituted by the exceeding and *social* character of constituent power:

The exclusion of sovereignty from constituent power is especially significant. It is impossible to establish today a form of constituent power conceived in terms of transcendence or "exception." The sovereign requires unity, which is irremediably broken by the radical pluralism of the emerging, contemporary concept of constituent power. Whereas sovereign decisions are always empty

³³ Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion. Awhile acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround»; S. Harney, F. Moten, *The Undercommons, Fugitive Planning and Black Study* cit., p. 17.

_____ Marco Baravalle, Assembly. Notes on fugitivity and capture _____

insofar as the sovereign will stands separate from and above society and insofar as the sovereign rules over the exception, today's constituent power is always full of social contents to the point of overflowing. To reconceive constituent power, then, the exception of sovereign power must be replaced by the excess, that is, the overflowing nature of social production and cooperation³⁴.

In Negri and Hardt's view, radical institutions are necessary but only possible when the link between institution and sovereignty is finally broken³⁵. The assembly, i.e. the social, it's the crucial terrain on which this project relies.

Newsome's *Assembly* is a powerful celebration of the fugitivity of Voqing, of queer and black social life. Moreover, it explores the possibility of a common approach to AI where the problems of the bias of learning datasets and the extraction of invisibilized social labor are addressed. At the same time, though, what seems to be lost is the abolitionist tension (as a double movement of institutional destitution and institutional invention) brought forward by Black Lives Matter and by many decolonization positions. In general, in a time of unprecedented visibility for African American artists and scholars, *Assembly* is an excellent opportunity to open up a reflection on the relationship between critique (as a function of the apparatus) and the undercommons of art, on the "fugitivity of fugitivity" when it is caught up in the artistic dispositive of neoliberal capture. Of course, one could argue that as a character of black social life, fugitivity is constitutively exceeding. There is always something that regenerates itself and escapes the capture of cultural industries. Also, as the works of Newsome or Arthur Jafa show, it could be stated that the radicality of this social dimension is not lost but ultimately conveyed in the products of popular culture and fashion. I believe, however, that if there is one way to diminish blackness as transformative radicality, it is through ignoring the threats posed by neoliberal capture.

³⁴ M. Hardt, T. Negri, *Assembly* cit., p. 37.

³⁵ «We must go beyond the assumptions of institutional sovereignty in a really substantial way. As we said earlier, abandoning sovereignty does not mean relinquishing autonomy and self-determination. It means leaving behind, on one hand, the sovereign relationship of power and domination and, on the other, the mandate to unity. In this passage the multitude needs institutions more than ever—not institutions to rule over us but institutions to foster continuity and organization, institutions to help organize our practices, manage our relationships, and together make decisions»; *ivi*, p. 38.

Abstract

L'articolo prende le mosse da *Assembly* (2022) di Rashaad Newsome. Opera ambiziosa e complessa (performance, installazione e workshop al medesimo tempo), si propone come poliedrica celebrazione del Voguing, uno stile di danza codificato negli Stati Uniti, durante gli anni Ottanta, nel contesto della *ball culture* gay, queer, nera e latina. Il presente testo si concentra sulle pratiche partecipative che caratterizzano l'opera e sulla concezione di assemblea che essa veicola. Infine, richiamando il lavoro di Fred Moten sul concetto di *fugitivity*, viene delineato un problema aperto. Come si definiscono linee di fuga a fronte dei tentativi di cooptazione neoliberale di quelle radicali istanze sociali proprie delle estetiche della *blackness* e recentemente incarnate dall'ultima ondata di Black Lives Matter?

The article takes its starting point from Assembly (2022) by Rashaad Newsome. An ambitious and complex work (performance, installation and workshop at the same time), it is proposed as a multifaceted celebration of Voguing, a dance style codified in the United States during the 1980s in the context of gay, queer, black and Latin ball culture. This text focuses on the participatory practices that characterize the work and the conception of assembly that it conveys. Finally, recalling Fred Moten's work on the concept of "fugitivity", an open problem is outlined. How do we define lines of escape in the face of neoliberal attempts to co-opt those radical social demands characteristic of blackness aesthetics and recently embodied by the latest wave of Black Lives Matter?

Parole chiave: assemblea, *fugitivity*, blackness, Voguing, Black Lives Matter.

Keywords: Assembly, Fugitivity, Blackness, Voguing, Black Lives Matter.