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Frau Fiber and the Synchronized Sewing Squad : Political Theory and Choreographing Labour

MYRON M. BEASLEY

The fiber and clothing industries have always been at the vanguard of the changing nature of capital as it moved from home weavers and pieceworkers to high-end ateliers and later steam-driven factories using machinery deliberately designed for the small hands of children. (Sherlock, 2007: 15)

Twenty years old, employed in a highly respectable dressmaking establishment, exploited by a lady with the pleasant name of Elise [...] It was the height of the season.

It was necessary, in the twinkling of an eye to conjure up magnificent dresses for the noble ladies invited to the ball in honour of the newly imported Princess of Wales. Mary Anne Walkley had worked uninterruptedly for 26 hours, with sixty other girls, thirty in each room. The rooms provided only one-third of the necessary quantity of air, measured in cubic feet. At night the girls slept in pairs in the stifling holes into which a bedroom was divided by wooden partitions [...] Mary Anne Walkley fell ill on Friday and died on the Sunday without, to the astonishment of Madame Elise, having finished off her bit of finery she was working on.

(‘The Obituary of Mary Anne Walkley’
in Marx 1976: 364-5)

Found moving in the window of Mess Hall - a performance space in the Rogers Park neighbourhood of Chicago - or in the abandoned storefront in Chicago’s ‘Loop’ district, a group of ‘textile workers’ arranged in a circle before sewing machines piecing bit by bit to music or just the simple sound of the ticking clock: measuring time versus Labour versus cost. ‘Let’s bring the jobs back!’ a young man yells as Frau Fiber (a.k.a. Carole Frances Lung) leads a parade

though the Rogers Park neighbourhood. Frau Fiber, who identifies as a textile worker, activist, artist (choreographer), and the group she founded, the Synchronized Sewing Manufacturing Squad performs choreographed garment productions - political performances of protest against the exportation of labour. Martin (1998) makes a compelling and rather robust argument towards a correlative between political theory and dance studies. He positions dance and choreographic studies as a viable mode for developing generative political thought and the power to extend political theory and social commentary. This essay considers the work of Frau Fiber and her Synchronized Sewing Manufacturing Squad as an example of ‘dance as critical theory and as critical action’ (Lepecki 2004: 4). In the set of performances and Frau Fiber’s understanding of choreography as a conceptual link between agency and history, what is realized is a link often neglected in the literature of social-movement theory. Specifically, I foreground Frau Fiber and the Sewing Squad’s performative actions as not only encouraging resistance but rather structural social change by engaging and ‘teaching’ those involved how to perform resistance. The move to write this project in the context of choreography is to insist on a critical and philosophical base towards movement and choreographic studies, one that reframes the parameters of how we engage in the conversations about labour and textiles, about memory and death, about choreography and politics.

In citing the moving obituary of Mary Anne Walkley, the garment worker in the epigraph of this essay, I foreground the lurking presence of death and the narratives of absent bodies that once performed in the tenuous, shifting, never stable and lethal stage of the textile industry, whose lives sadly more than often succumb to senseless deaths, deaths for the sake of capitalist production. Marx helps us to remember the messy history - by way of critique - of the conditions of the textile workers, while also reminding us that great political thought and movements are propelled on memory: memories of the dead, the dead labour workers and the often-forgotten ancestors. As I argue in this essay, and as Martin (1998) posits and encourages, political theory, particularly in the area of social movements is *not* divergent from dance, movement and choreography studies. Choreography in its sheer premise instructs, arranges and interprets life. It also goes one step further in its insistence on reflexivity and stands conceivably at the vortex of theory and (live) performance. I situate choreography as a theory-making and highly political act that critiques and interprets the intricacies of a social life that points towards reflexivity in an often accessible and creative manner. I explore Frau Fiber and her group's generative performative actions to ponder and extend Martin's guiding question: what can political thought potentially learn from conceptual forms of dance, movement and choreography? I continue to tease out how this conceptual and theoretical form of choreography might look.

FRAU FIBER AND THE SYNCHRONIZED SEWING SQUAD

'My great grandmother was a tailor,' says Frau Fiber. 'My grandmother was a seamstress and accomplished in the art of domestic craft. I was taught by my grandmother to sew my own clothes.' Frau Fiber, who worked as a pattern maker and designer for a couture bridal gown company, was part of the 'never talked about

thousands' who lost their jobs after the 9/11 catastrophe. 'I became acutely aware from first hand experience [...] being victimized by the policies and procedures [...] witnessing the corruption and greed.' She says she sadly learned of the horrid history of the textile industry while working in it, not to mention how even today we export such horrific labour practices abroad. 'So the largely unregulated textile industry in the States abandons workers here, for even less restrictions and labour practices abroad.' This could be considered a new form of colonialism, exporting labour, unfair practices and feeble resources through international corporations that sacrifice human lives for the sake of capitalist profits. Frau Fiber points to the oft-invisible intersections of high fashion - read as art - and the behind-the-scenes, hidden and debased conditions and labour practices of the workers who create the products. Her desire is to disseminate knowledge of the complex system of the textile industry from production, advertising and distribution to consumption - a system that in turn affects every textile and garment worker on a global working stage. Frau Fiber articulates her message through the form of a set of choreographed performances that invites community engagement. Specifically, I highlight Frau Fiber's political treatise that guides her creative work and then pay special attention to the *Redressing Nola* performance as to illustrate how her generative political performances respond to contemporary social and political issues and the past labour practices to bring honour to the dead labour workers.

For six months at the Mess Hall performance space Frau Fiber hosted the 'The Sewing Rebellion', a free weekly workshop, which she defines as 'a cultural revolution where participants are invited to emancipate themselves from the global garment industry by learning the skills to produce your own garments'. She includes in the description that she would 'share knowledge of the garment industry, pattern-making and sewing', and encourages 'the reuse, renovation and recycling



• Image of the Sew Squad at a performance in Chicago.
Photo: Natalie D. A. Bennett

of existing garments and textiles into new, unique garments tailored to individual tastes and body shapes'. Frau Fiber predicates her 'work' and 'production' on the themes of empowerment, pedagogy and social reform (i.e. revolution). Firstly, she situates her movement as a critical performance to 'emancipate' the participants through the acquisition of skills with which to construct their own garments. The construction of garments is more than a mere act of adorning the body but, rather, understands construction, sewing and stitching as liberatory actions. Using an action that includes instructions on intricate but do-able details of the process of stitching (the back stitch, catch stitch, hemming, slip stitch, running stitch etc.) - the forming and training of the body - Frau Fiber instructs participants in the basic steps of a choreographed performance of resistance on both the body and the fabric. Further, in her announcement to 'reuse' - coupled with her willingness to 'share knowledge of the garment industry' - she harkens towards a reverse discourse, a subversive dance by first 'letting in'

participants on trade secrets. This provides acquired tools with which to dismantle the harsh and pointed materiality of capitalism and to show how it is transfigured through the textile industry. Yet she includes 'all body shapes', for she indicates that she has seen the 'ill effects of the fashion industry's visions of beauty'. She promotes the view that all society and not just the anorexic body - a 'perfect body', perceived as the most disciplined body and that which is perpetuated and endorsed by the fashion industry - is allowed to participate in this dance of liberation.

During the final Mess Hall performance which she labelled as 'The Sewing Rebellion Celebration of labour - a full day', the group performed 'labour' in the form of a homemade garment parade where participants shouted 'Bring the jobs back!' as they embarked through the neighbourhood. This event was followed by a labour trade show. Adorning the walls inside the Mess Hall building are garments hanging with labels attached. Most display the cost of the fabric (in many instances it was all reused) and

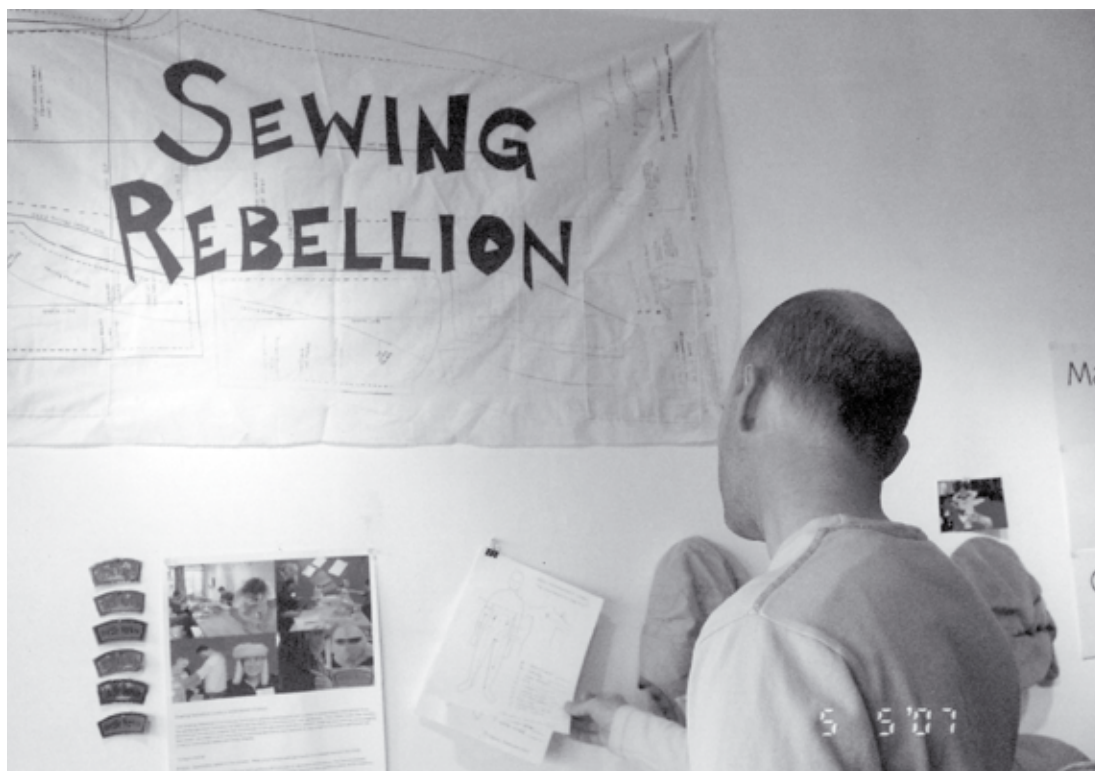
the time and labour it took to construct the garments. Occasionally garments with a 'Made in China' tag were juxtaposed with a homemade version of the same style - which demonstrates that the cost of the homemade garment is considerably lower and the quality far better. But as the excitement builds and people scatter throughout the room playing and dancing with fabric, attention slowly moves to the centre and at the sound of a whistle the Synchronized Sewing Squad begin a performance of piece-work in which they construct a hunter's hat. They attempt to make as many as possible within a certain time frame. A gentleman from the audience of onlookers shouts, 'Look at the worker! She is holding up the productivity.' Another from the other side of the performance space shouts, 'That worker is a slacker! We should get rid of her.' Though participatory, such instantaneous responses signalled a reminder of the real purpose of this dance performance. A dance choreographed to mirror the manufactory industrial assembly lines becomes in essence a

mirror of labour practices that challenges audience members to ask themselves how they participate in unfair labour practices. 'I'll never look at fabric that same way,' a woman says as she learns of unfair labour practices by reading through the information tags located on the fabric and garments displayed on the walls. Through the dance of the Squad the audience becomes acutely aware of the politics of the textile and garment industry. But ultimately we realize how we can join the revolution by the simple yet profound gesture of learning the dance steps to create and recycle our own garments.

REDRESSING NOLA

In July 2007 the Synchronized Sewing Squad and Frau Fiber embarked on a choreographic journey to New Orleans. This performance responded to the Katrina catastrophe, at the beckoning of residents in the Gentilly ward, who recounted narratives of despair prevalent after the hurricane. Frau Fiber and the Squad organized a

¹ FEMA is the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency.



• Onlooker observing at the Sewing Rebellion performance. Photo: Natalie D. A. Bennett

cloth drive and implemented the Portable Textile Reconstruction Unit / Pedal Powered Sewing Machines, which they pedalled throughout the Gentilly neighbourhood offering their services as textile workers. The goal, according to Frau Fiber, is an 'attempt to re-dress and re-build domestic environments by moving from FEMA trailer to FEMA trailer constructing "objects of need" for victims of the Katrina catastrophe.'¹ Again Fiber incorporates her philosophy of re-use even in the preparation of the performance. For example, the 'Portable Textile Reconstruction Unit was assembled with Katrina flooded bikes and stools, donated old Singer treadle sewing machines, used tarp [tarpaulin, ed.] pouches which held: pattern rulers, thread, patterns, zippers, chalk, pins and fabric swatches'. All the cloth, bike trailer, bike parts and sewing machines were donated. In addition to moving from trailer to trailer they found the need to move about the streets on the Portable Textile Reconstruction Units, holding long stretching of fabric at intersections, performing movement at the sounds of their voices, as if cheerleaders at a sports game. The purpose of cheers initially was to announce their presence and their desire to inform daily the community of their presence in the neighbourhood. The group remained in the area for thirty days and each day, the ritual performance became a hallmark of their presence to the community. I consider this uniquely choreographed movement with fabric throughout the Gentilly ward a memorial ritual performance to dead labour workers.

Paul Connerton reminds us that the great revolution of the nineteenth century 'was transformed from a circularity of movement to the advent of the new' (Connerton 1989: 6). In other words he suggests that society remembers through the recycling of traditional movement (i.e., ritual practices and dance) and through objects. He further posits that movement and objects contain power to inspire revolution, as within these elements a sense of history is stored. Memory is sedimented in the body and in objects. Frau Fiber and the Synchronized Sewing

Manufacturing Squad's ritual performance helps society remember the politics of labour and the textile industry, while simultaneously reminding us of the dead labour workers. 'Knowledge of all human activities in the past is possible only through a knowledge of their traces' (1989: 13). Connerton highlights such traces as the garments of France during the Revolution. *Redressing Nola* is a performance developed through and about the traces of bodies.

Historically, New Orleans was considered an important location for the textile industry because of its major production and export of cotton in the United States. The intersections are paramount - a city that was made on the backs of 'free' labour (slaves) and the cotton industry that has benefited greatly from the use of unrestricted working conditions. Both phenomena produced a multitude of senseless deaths. Death lurks in the still-remaining and ghostly buildings dating back to that period of high textile exportation, yet traces of that period are also evident in the sacred 'cities of the dead', the above-ground tombs in the many cemeteries scattered throughout the city. It is almost impossible to enter the city without passing this very physical representation of death. As Frau Fiber and the Synchronized Sewing Manufacturing Squad criss-crossed the city on their pedal-powered cycles hoarding fabric and revitalizing domestic environments and constructing objects of need, the city of New Orleans was rebuilding itself from the horrible catastrophe of Katrina, another phenomenon that produced thousands of senseless deaths. Their performance is a homage to the dead.

HARD WORK, HARD LABOUR

Frau Fiber's generative choreographed performances further extend an understanding of political thought by performing theory - critical theoretical thought that attends to dismantling power structures and delivering its message to the masses with the aim of inspiring social change. Through her use of garments and by calling attention to the horrors of the textile



• Items made and posted with “labor vs cost” at the Sewing Rebellion at Mess Hall. Photo: Natalie D. A. Bennett

industry, she intellectually and philosophically grounds her choreographed projects as interventions and social commentary. By situating her work in such a political paradigm, she moves to remind us that dance is an intellectual and philosophical endeavor and not just ‘beautiful art’. At the conclusion of thirty days of Redressing Nola, Frau Fiber described the project as ‘hard, the city was steamy hot, sewing with a manual sewing machine was just hard.’ After a moment of reflection, she posits, ‘so is this type of work, we must create work that tells the truth about the politics of society - the good and the bad.’

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