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Modern Dance, Domestic Life and Civil Society

Introduction

In her book *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (2000) Seyla Benhabib uses the concept of an ‘alternative genealogy of modernity’ to help her both to understand Arendt’s political philosophy and to rethink the potential for civil society to become a progressive political force at the beginning of the twenty first century. The idea of an alternative genealogy of modernity refers to a heterogeneity of social and political forms, spaces and acts that might be used to remap and redefine a modernity whose dominant topology has been shaped by the binary division between so-called public and private spheres. Alternative modernities have already been elaborated and explored from a range of different perspectives including feminist and postcolonial ones: for example, in Rita Felski’s *Gender of Modernity* (1995) and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s * Provincialising Europe* (2000). In this paper I want to elaborate upon the idea of an alternative genealogy of modernity from my perspective as a dancer. Thinking through the sociality of art and, more specifically, of some historical dance-making practices can make visible alternative spaces and processes of the (potentially) political. In the West, the modes of art-making form part of an as yet not fully explored arena of the social and of social practices. Modernist and Romantic ideologies have tended to preclude attention to the specific sociabilities of art-making. On the one hand Modernist ideology and art discourses have promoted the idea of an art work’s ‘autonomy’: its radical separation from the social relationships, the bodies and the
conditions of its making. On the other hand Romantic ideology, still pervasive in popular conceptions of art practices, construes creation as interiority and individualistic expression. Socialist feminist and Marxist discussions of art have emphasized the social conditions of art-making but these have tended to be concerned with the social inequalities instituted within the public/private split rather than seeking to destabilize that division itself by posing questions of differences within the social. In my discussion below I draw on aspects of early modern dance practice and creation in taking up Benhabib’s concern to mobilise an alternative genealogy of modernity towards a renewal and reactivation of civic life. This project involves unsettling clear distinctions between the so-called ‘public’ and ‘private’ but, at the same time, as Benhabib cautions ‘the binarity of public and private spheres must be reconstructed and not merely rejected’. (2000:2006)

It is important to acknowledge that ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘civic’ and ‘domestic’ are not essential categories that can be taken for granted but are terms and aspects of social life whose boundaries and meanings are shifting and unstable. What, for example, does ‘the domestic’ currently signify and in what ways are distinctions between so-called public and private realms of existence currently being reconfigured? What might be learned by charting the movement and significance of terms that circulate around this distinction? For example, so-called ‘privatisation,’ which is the extension of the concept of ‘private property’ to all ‘organs’ and processes of social life, is a major contemporary neo-liberal and economic rationalist phenomenon that is helping to redraw public/private boundaries. I am thinking here of the privatisation of the provision of services and ‘care,’ including the once ‘domestic’ practices of child-care, care of the sick and aged-care; and the redefinition of public space in such instances as the recent attempt to prohibit photography at Melbourne’s (privately owned) Southbank. (See, for example, Egan)

Privatisation leads to a ‘de-privatisation’ of human relationships in the sense that the motive of profit reduces all interactions to economic values or, as in the second instance mentioned above, relations between citizens and owners of so-called ‘private’
property are conceived legalistically. In the quasi-privatisation of our universities student–teacher relationships are now defined in terms of educational and economic efficiency; in hospitals relations are governed by the need for rapid patient turn over or 'through put'; and art-making has been reframed as an industry. These developments can be seen as extending and intensifying the kind of transformation Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) when he describes the transition from the medieval to the modern mode of schooling. He writes that in this transition, a 'pupil working for a few minutes with the master, while the rest of the heterogeneous group remained idle and unattended', came to be viewed as wasteful and irrational. (1977:147) In the then emerging disciplinary regimes of education, and supported by developments in printing, a class of three hundred and sixty students would soon be reading and writing continuously for the whole lesson. (165–6) In this process of educational transformation relationships and spaces are profoundly reconceptualised and re-made, becoming, in modern terms 'public' rather than 'private'. Indeed it is this kind of transformation that helps to create the modern public-private distinction in the first place.

The current deprivatisation of relationships in education, health, art-making and elsewhere has been supported by, or is implicated within, a concurrent tendency towards 'professionalisation'. I do not intend to discuss the idea of professionalisation at length here but merely to use the term as a short-hand for an historical tendency which, although it ostensibly involves *specialisation* and, one might have thought, a proliferation of differences, instead reduces all knowledges and practices to the one rational model of knowledge. Professionalisation amounts, to use Couze Venn's phrase, to 'the institution of a monolingualism. It abolishes the possibility of alternative worlds'. (2006:82)

The concept of private life or the private realm was originally linked to the idea of 'deprivation' – and referred to the women, immigrants and slaves who were excluded from participation in the Greek polis. (See, for example, Young:1987) The current era of 'privatisation' on the other hand seems to have helped to bring
about a condition in which there is now radical privation in civic life: that is, a reduction of possibilities for the intermingling of different worlds. In her book on Arendt, Benhabib, too, writing from her United States perspective but in tune with recent local commentators, discusses what she calls the ‘decline of the public sphere in our societies’.¹ She notes ‘the weakness of citizens’ movements and deliberative organizations when compared to markets and professional lobbying’. (2000:xiii) She concludes by arguing that ‘the recovery of the public world is impossible and unlikely without a parallel re-construction of the private sphere’. (214)

**Salon**

In the alternative genealogy of modernity from which a revitalization of contemporary civil society might proceed the boundary or division between public and private worlds is complicated and not easily traced. In her book on Arendt, Benhabib draws attention to the former’s early interest in the short-lived late eighteenth century Jewish salons in Germany in which a space was made for new forms of social interaction. These salons, such as the one led by Rahel Varnhagen, are particularly noteworthy from the point of view of the possibilities for a new heterogeneity in public life. Even aside from the specifically Jewish salons that Arendt’s biography of Varnhagen commemorates, salons more generally were ‘spaces within the (bourgeois) household – usually a festive living room – in which individuals from different ranks, groups, and classes, even faiths, could mix and mingle ... they presented occasions for experimentation with self-fashioning and with less hierarchical, more fluid modes of interaction’ than those of the strictly public or ‘social’ sphere. (Benhabib 2000:xi) The salons revealed the presence within modern society, Benhabib argues, of an ‘alternative form of public sphere, in which lines between intimacy and sociability, the public and the private are renegotiated and resignified’. (xii)

The alternative genealogy of modernity of which the eighteenth century salons, themselves a heterogeneous phenomenon, represent an instance is not necessarily accessible to politics as
such. Its mobilization in support of revitalizing contemporary civil society as a progressive political force will involve, according to Benhabib, a creative act of remembering, of ‘rethinking and reappropriating the past, just as a collector or an artist might do’. (2000:x) Indeed the realm of the arts has recently come into focus in the context of bringing new perceptions and paradigms to such disciplines as International Relations. Philip Darby and Paul Carter have noted a, ‘growing conviction that the political as we have traditionally understood it has come to be associated with closure. (This) has led people to look for politics in different guises and in alternative sites’. What if spaces, sites, events and relationships of cultural production which, I will argue below, do not always fall easily into binarised categories of the public or the private, were to able to suggest new imaginaries of politics and political association in civil society?

It is on the basis of this rather lengthy, formal and necessarily condensed introduction that I want to proceed now precisely as a ‘collector,’ and like an artist, in order to rethink the domestic and the private sphere with a view to contributing to new conceptions of the political. I will be picking up fragments and ideas from cultural sites, everyday events, and dance practices where fixed categories seem to fail and where alternative worlds are sustained.

**Living Room**

Recently I took a short holiday staying in The Chalet at Mt Buffalo in North Eastern Victoria. Built in 1910, The Chalet is a very homely accommodation and was at one point a destination for holidaying railway employees. It seems to be staffed now by young travellers, many of them from Europe. It is rich in spaces for socialising: drawing rooms, open-fired lounge rooms, sitting rooms with views and a bar, a games room. All carefully judged in their spaciousness, these rooms are generous without being impressive or grand. My seventeen year old daughter started playing the piano in one of them at about 10am one morning. Several employees and guests came in to comment, listen or congratulate her for playing. The scene sounds rather genteel, perhaps, but I was struck by my daughter’s playing as an act of
outspokenness that transgressed boundaries of privacy. The piano was a voice speaking loudly in a space that was both public and intimate and it brought about reactions and social intercourse.

I was reminded somewhat obliquely of the painting Young Mother Sewing by Mary Cassatt. Griselda Pollock discusses this painting in her book Differencing the Canon (1999) where she argues that the presence of the artist, Cassatt, is quite tangible in the painting even though she does not visibly appear there. It is the direct, outspoken look of the young girl leaning on her mother’s lap that leads Pollock to propose that a conversation is taking place between the girl and the painter at work – a conversation or exchange that, inscribed in the girl’s inquiring gaze, is part of the painting’s imaginary. The apparently straightforward bourgeois ‘domestic’ space of the mother and daughter is thus also a quasi public space of work, a workshop, an artist’s studio, an artisanal space. There is a fineness and attunement in both Cassatt’s and Pollock’s perceptions here that enables the conventional constitution of objects, spaces, relationships and categories to be destabilized. According to their perceptions it is simply not possible to assume that the depicted space of ‘Young Mother Sewing’ is unproblematically or essentially ‘domestic’, nor that the meanings of the domestic can be taken for granted.

Atelier

While doing research into dance-making relationships in early American modern dance I learned that women dance artists struggled with the question of ‘organisation’ and with the conditions or structures by means of which they might make and show their work in the public arena. The invention of modern dance, occurring from the late nineteenth century was, in part, a function of women’s demand for a role in public life. The early modern dancers led lives that were unconventional for women of their time; they also insisted on their status as artists rather than simply as artistes (see Koritz 1995). They helped to redefine femininity and the female body and sought to claim full personhood and access to universality through ‘moving freely’. The early modern dancers found, however, that freedom of movement
or the conditions under which one might practise as a self-defining artist – could not be maintained in formal, publicly recognised organisational structures. Organisation in ‘major’ or official terms inevitably meant loss of authorial and artistic control and independence for women. The early modern dancers actively eschewed formal incorporation in favour of establishing informal quasi ‘households’: in other words they valued the ‘minor’ and the unofficial organisations they created as the condition for practising their (dance) art. Doris Humphrey who had begun her dancing career as a member of Ruth St Denis and Dancers was critical of St Denis’s partner, Ted Shawn, who wanted to create a large organisation with a permanent home to which the arms of teaching, performing, touring and lecturing would contribute. Humphrey’s perspective was that ‘such a tremendous organization would swamp me, or I will be required to work for the good of the institution to a greater extent than I want to ... [Shawn] is most interested in building the institution of Denishawn, which he wants to do by everybody’s cooperation with himself as dictator. And he’s right, I think, if your aim is a smooth-running organization’. (Humphrey and Cohen: 1972:71,74)

From time to time it did seem to the modern dancers that joining together into a larger formalised entity would help them overcome some of the ‘insurmountable problems’ associated with trying to survive independently. But they experimented only reluctantly with larger, more formal structures. Humphrey responded to fellow artist Helen Tamiris’s call for the creation of a combined Dance Repertory Theatre by admitting that it ‘has seemed necessary for us to incorporate, and of course I hate that idea because organization has come to be such a hateful thing. They simply organized the life out of Denishawn’. (90) Humphrey spoke positively, instead, of the ‘living-working arrangements’ she had experienced in dancing with St Denis. The dance-making organisation or ‘company’ she herself created as a maturing artist was a kind of artisanal household. As a modern dance choreographer-dancer Humphrey needed to have a direct, physical, transformative impact upon her group of dancers. Much like that of a (medieval) master craftsman her practice could not be ‘professionalised’ in the (modern) sense: it needed to contain...
something of the private and the domestic as the conditions for transmitting dance values.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Humphrey and others, particularly women, (re)-created artisanal workshop-households: spaces of work and modes of ‘making’ that defied any simple distinction between the public and the private. Throughout the twentieth century modern dancers have reiterated these values. For example, Melbourne based choreographer Lucy Guerin has commented that when she began dancing with the choreographer Sara Rudner in New York she had been Rudner’s baby sitter and that it was important for Rudner to have this kind of relationship with her dancers. (Guerin 1992:42) Twyla Tharp has also discussed in her autobiography *Push Comes to Shove* (1992) the various living-working arrangements with her dancers that were the condition for her own development as a choreographer.

Early modern dance was in part the deprivatisation by women of their bodies. As women, modern dance artists sought to fashion and disseminate symbolic embodiments and kinaesthetics that could speak to universal themes. The performances of dancers like Isadora Duncan, Humphrey and Martha Graham helped to reconfigure and re-gender the public realm. At the same time, however, modern dance was by definition a set of individual practices and personal dance visions. Its body could not be simply deprivatised because that which was particular, singular, personal about each artist’s sense of movement was what grounded her signature dance aesthetics or recognized ‘style’. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic energetic qualities upon which the differences between the work of different modern dance artists were founded could only be transmitted to other dancers within intimate, personalised, artisanal relationships, that is, working relationships and conditions that retained something of the private and the domestic.

It is important to articulate in somewhat broader terms what was/is at stake in the preferred modes and relationships of modern dance production. What modern dancers needed to confront in their dance-making was the question of ‘I’ and ‘you’: in
other words, how were they to understand, or what would be the relations amongst, the individual (dancer-choreographer) and the group (of dancers)? What would be the nature of their group 'we'. In proceeding from solo dance-making to larger visions, modern dance artists formed dance groups within which specific and precise dance values were transmitted from body to body between the artist-choreographer (also a dancer) and the other dancers. However, this process of transmission – or perhaps translation – became the site of the acknowledgment of individual differences rather than the creation of 'an undifferentiated group of neutral subjects'. (Goux 1994: 183) Modern dance groups, while each represented a unique style, were heterogenous. Each group member's identity as a dancer was forged in her actual, individual relationship with the artist-choreographer (not, as in ballet, for example, where the relation is to an impersonal social norm or 'absolute' set of conventions).

In an interview published in *Why Different?* (2000) Luce Irigaray has argued that, 'a large part of the history of philosophy, and even Western politics, always refers to a solitary subject or a subject who lives communally with other similar subjects.' (108) What fails to be represented, she argues is 'the relationship between two subjects inasmuch as they're different' which is what she calls 'intersubjectivity' (108). The domestic sphere is precisely that place where intersubjectivity is 'practised'. According to Anna Yeatman, the domestic is the place of 'small-scale, intimate, social-interactional contexts where the orientation of the actors to each other is particularistic and committed'. (1986:167) These 'small-scale' contexts Yeatman argues are not adequately recognised in sociology as distinctive social contexts. Traditionally in sociology 'the domestic' has either been cast outside the social or reduced to micro-instances of bigger social structures – such as when 'the family' is taken to be a microcosm of 'society' – rather than being understood as a different kind of social entity within which fundamentally different kinds of relationships can exist. When the public aspects of social existence are privileged and valued what makes a person a specific individual is denied: 'the specific context of interaction' in which unique individuality is mutually recognized is not represented. Modern dancers
foregrounded intersubjective relationships in their dance-making and this affected what the work looked like (on stage) and was also an explicit theme in some dances. Dance historian Susan Manning has said of the early work of Mary Wigman, for example, that it ‘allowed female spectators to imagine a cultural space where their needs for affiliation and self-realization did not conflict.’ And Selma-Jean Cohen has described Humphrey’s *New Dance* (1935) as the ‘affirmation of the state, where the individual contributes positively to his group without sacrifice of personal identity.’ (Humphrey and Cohen 1972:137) In other words, the dances re-created in the public arena the intersubjective, social ambience and conditions within which the dance was made.

What Yeatman makes explicit and what the modern dancers understood was that individuality is not a given but has to be, as it were, produced within certain kinds of relationships and supported by certain kinds of social conditions – and that these conditions have traditionally been those of the private or domestic sphere. If the public realm is to find space for intersubjective relationships, for a ‘we’ that is not considered as simply a group of undifferentiated subjects (or as a collection of radically separate individuals) then it must recognize the conditions that are necessary for this kind of ‘we’ to be produced and sustained.

It is not surprising that the modern dancers’ artisanal, quasi-domestic styles of *organisation*, were not necessarily recognized as such. Their ways of organising seemed to some commentators too informal, too ‘private’, not professional, too dependent on ‘personality’ – hence not ‘organisation’ at all. It is worth noting that in a similar way, perhaps, little attention was paid to artisanal guilds by social and political commentators of early modernity. Anthony Black argues that emergent civil society in the early modern period, while it represented a new heterogeneity in public life, nevertheless institutionalized ‘the encounter between strangers’. It ‘provided a framework within which the development of closer *gemeinschaftlich* relationships was not expected’. (1984:38) The master-apprentice relationship and its quasi domestic conditions and affective bondings were not conducive to the new social contract of modernity and were
regarded as subversive by lords, church and state. Furthermore, relationships within the workshop, while based in inequalities of knowledge and experience, were not hierarchical in the modern, industrial sense: that is, they did not represent an institutionalized or class-based division of labour. In the artisanal workshop 'the master was also a workman and an artisan and was frequently referred to as such'. (Stone 1921:82) The apprentice would become, in turn, a master. Similarly, in modern dance the artist/choreographer was also one of her own dancers: she worked in rehearsal and appeared on stage as a member of her own group.

The modern dance-making artisanal households with their indeterminateness with respect to the distinction between 'public' and 'private' and their commitment to 'we' relationships can be included in an alternative genealogy of modernity. Modern dancers created new forms of organising and social infrastructure: matriarchal artisanal households within modernity where the work done and made together embodied the values of particularity and difference. These workplaces were part of, and helped to complicate the heterogeneity of civil society and public life. Indeed, closer attention to modern dance artisanal values and processes can contribute to an understanding of what important social and potentially political spaces and relationships disappear from view when public and private realms are constituted as mutually exclusive opposites or when the domestic is devalued.

Veranda

I want to pursue the idea of the intersubjective relationship by returning to the painting by Cassatt. In her discussion of the painting, Pollock argues that Cassatt has depicted not a mother-child dyad but an intersubjective world. Furthermore, she argues that the painting itself is a product of the intersubjective space that it depicts. I would want to add to Pollock's discussion of this painting that the subjectivity of the girl child is, rightfully, not yet simply a function of 'the social' – if by that is meant the strictly public – as opposed to a strictly personal realm. In intersubjective or what I have discussed as 'we' relationships, values and
meanings are negotiated in the framework of each person’s particularity and uniqueness. It is the traditional role of the domestic sphere to foster and recognize these aspects and processes of selfhood. The artisanal spaces and relationships of modern dance-making are noteworthy because they recognize the need to foster both personal and universal aspects of the body/self: they do/did not understand these two aspects as mutually exclusive but, rather, as necessarily interdependent. Both the artisanal modern dance studio, and perhaps the eighteenth century salons, are/were sites of domestic risk-taking, that is they do/did not assume sameness – or difference for that matter – but work(ed) on the premise that the dance amongst singularity, intersubjectivity, communality and difference involves establishing and maintaining conditions for the intermingling of different worlds. Similarly, in the public sphere of politics general consensus is sought - but in a heterogeneous society consensus must be judged against need for the recognition and negotiation of particularities and differences. A re-invigoration of civil society might require a new valuing of the particularistic intersubjectivity that is traditionally fostered, learned and practised in the specific conditions associated with the domestic.

There are of course problems for women in seeking to reclaim or resignify ‘the domestic’ even when that means a putting into question of the binary division between private and public realms. The domestic is too close to what Arendt called a ‘worldlessness,’ a naturalized ‘intimacy’ characterized as the collapse of the fertile social space between people. But at the same time, Arendt argued that one cannot always be ‘in public’. She argues that ‘a life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective sense’. (Arendt quoted in Benhabib 2000:213) We must be able to hide from public sight – not always be in the realm of appearances. What I take from these ideas of Arendt’s is that it is important not to confuse the domestic, the home or even privacy with an absence of culture, sociality, sociability, civility, but instead to recognise the need for and to value different social
'worlds'.

Modern dance practices – and the way they problematise any opposition between the public and the private – can help to make it clear that in the current landscape of civil society we need to look at what goes on more or less outside of or in the interstices of what are perceived as its organs or formal structures. It might be important to recognize and value places and occasions of informality where it may seem like there is nothing civic or political going on. This is of course not a new idea. De Certeau (1988), for example, has called our attention to practices of ‘tactics,’ forms of the ‘perruque’ or what workers do for themselves in the company’s time. We need to see that choices are being made about modes of association where it may look like no choices have been made – as in informality, in certain cultural practices, apparently casual meetings, in homes, in moments of apparent idleness.

While enjoying the face to face comforts of Mt Buffalo Chalet I finished reading the book, Kanthapura, by Raja Rao. In Kanthapura Rao tells the story of his Kerala village’s resistance to British rule and its participation in non-violence during 1947. This story as a body of knowledge and history arises from and is kept alive from within the domestic, a place in which familiars, supernatural beings and visitors can mingle. Rao describes how the story ‘may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale’. (2003:6)

Civil society can be conceived as a heterogenous field in which people explore, discuss, debate, propose, undertake forms of social action. Ideally, civil society informs, challenges, resists and converses with the realm of the strictly or ‘professionally’ political. Tracing an alternative genealogy of modernity means re-thinking the role of the domestic in relation to the civic outside of any binary logic that casts the former as the natural underpinning, ground or opposite of the civic. It means locating the resources with which to keep alive alternative worlds.
Notes

1. Local commentators include Judith Brett see Opinion: ‘Howard: man of this moment’, The Age (22/2/06).

2. Benhabib writes that: The homeless self is the individual ready to be ravaged by the forces of the social against which it must fight daily to protect itself. Benhabib, S. The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt. Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 213.

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