

Freedom is a Performance Hangout* (*Click on this fake sweat distraction technique to release infinite scroll)

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To cite this article: Owen G. Parry (2023) Freedom is a Performance Hangout* (*Click on this fake sweat distraction technique to release infinite scroll), *Performance Research*, 28:2, 29-38, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2023.2260692

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2260692>

Published online: 19 Dec 2023.

We want to have it both ways: to be distracted from our own failings and to-do lists, while being simultaneously relieved of the kind of exhausting obligation evoked by the presence and needs of the actual other – those same obligations that, for at least several millennia, went, until recently, under the name of ‘society’.

Dominic Pettman (2016: 9)

Busy, addicted and distracted. We live in a time when the division between online and offline, is, like work and leisure under neoliberalism, increasingly obsolete. As Dominic Pettman writes in his book *Infinite Distraction: Paying attention to social media*, ‘we can no longer speak in confident terms of the virtual in contrast to the actual’ (2016: 16) thanks in large part to web 2.0 and mobile devices, which keep us performing and keep us hanging out. This is the nowhere land of screens and informatics that Baudrillard predicted in *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Baudrillard 2008 [1988]). Pettman writes, ‘subjectivity has lost its “scene”, the traditional site of genesis and drama, and been replaced by the “obscene”’, an information superhighway (2016: 6). The Internet re-produces more and more spectacles, cat pics, memes, conspiracy theories and TikToks than we can ever consume, but the more we participate, ‘just one more click might do the trick’, the more we become ‘connected but alone’, or so we have been told (Turkle 2011). The ‘scene’ of performance and democracy has been replaced by mediated networks that promise sovereignty yet thwart democratic collectivity. Instead, freedom appears as a form of

selfie-expressionism by making choices in the marketplace of consumer individualism.

The digital influencer, a member of the social media precariat who has enough followers to warrant themselves ‘instafamous’, incorporates product placements and brand endorsements into aspirational lifestyle performances for camera – just as the artist or academic ups their social media presence by liking and sharing ‘on brand’ content, articles and selfies in the lead up to their exhibition or book launch. As visual artist Hito Steyerl puts it, we are no longer so much amused to death as we once were in Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, but rather we are ‘represented to pieces’ (Steyerl 2012: 168). Both the decision to participate in or disengage from digital networks renders subjects powerless over their attention – not only how and what they see, but also *how* they are seen by others. How, then, might theatre, which Jacques Rancière in his book *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011 [2008]) famously declared an exemplary community form, be redeployed as a way of testing alternate modes of meeting and of being together at a time of infinite distraction? What new modes of performance, attention and indeed *meeting* might be called forth and re-imagined? I want to posit that performance and hanging out are intrinsic to the formation of this current paradigm, but might also, when re-combined as social, non-productive, durational practices, offer something different.

A kind of meeting

This article turns to an example of my practice-based research, a four-hour live performance titled *fic.the.sky*, developed with three performers from the European performance troop Medeber Teatro.^[note]¹ The performance premiered at the Midlands Arts Centre for Fierce Festival, Birmingham, UK in October 2017 and was live-streamed via *The New Inquiry*, an online magazine of cultural and literary criticism. *fic.the.sky* is part of a series of live works I created from 2015 to 2019 that explore performance, attention economies and collectivity since the Internet, which I have been calling a performance hangout.

In this article, I would like to explore this concept further by considering a performance hangout as *a kind of meeting*, albeit a non-meeting or even an anti-meeting, in which attendees are neither compelled to act and participate, nor expected to ‘switch off’ and disengage. Both approaches, engagement and

disengagement (as well as pitching online against offline), I want to posit here, reproduce paradoxical demands and ideologies, which can feel at times as divisive as the punks versus the hippies. Both of which, as we know, have lost any sense of a 'scene' or autonomy from market capitalism, too. Instead, I want to offer up a performance hangout as an experimental, open-ended concept that fosters alternate modes of attention and spectatorship, conditioned by a set of committed practices that I will outline in more detail here, including performance (work) and hanging out (leisure).

While a performance hangout is created simultaneously for a live audience in a physical location and live streamed online, it is distinct from genres such as hybrid, multi-reality, transmedia, post-Internet or post-digital performance, and is not a product of the 'zoomer' art of the post-pandemic either. While a performance hangout relates to the 'social turn' in contemporary art (Bishop 2006), it can neither be fixed in relation to established forms such as endurance performance, relational aesthetics, and participatory or immersive theatre. Importantly, a performance hangout is not a genre of theatre or a social experiment. Rather, it is an open-ended, experimental concept still very much in process and open to inflexion. While turning to a single example of my own performance practice here, I want to offer up a performance hangout as a generative concept for making, attending to and thinking about a range of contemporary performances and live artworks that comprise performance and hanging out across an extended duration. This writing too moves somewhat schizophrenically between differing modes. Writing both from within the performance as a maker, and critically from outside the work as an audience member hanging out, but also writing perhaps from somewhere else – a different time or temporality. This feeling of being both inside and outside the work, of hanging out with a show across an extended duration and becoming the show, makes for both a simultaneous undoing of positionality and affirmation of something new – a singularization that I see as indispensable to a performance hangout.

fic.the.sky

The second in a series of four-hour long performance hangouts, *fic.the.sky*, incorporates music, choreography, sculpture and hanging out.^[note]² It combines two distinct areas: a clearly defined area for the performance, and an area in which

the audience come and go, sit and hang out. The clear separation between the virtual/theatrical area for performance (work) and the area for the audience (leisure) is intrinsic to its formation. In some sense, it reproduces (or at least diagrams) the divisions that once existed between work and leisure in Fordism, except the work performed here is not the real sweat and blood of labour in a time of 'mechanical reproduction' (Benjamin 2008 [1935]), nor necessarily the 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato 1996) or 'affective labour' (Hardt 1999) of the service industry including the theatre; but rather the work performed, the choreographic sequences interspersed with hanging out, enact the flows and infinite scrolls of 'playbour' in a time of digital re-mediation, algorithms and automation (Kücklich 2005, see also The Rodina 2015).^{[note]3}

fic.the.sky is structured through a four-hour score of music: mostly slowed-down pop music backing tracks and fan-made eight-bit versions of pop songs, accompanied by a series of easy, pedestrian, non-accumulative choreographies. The movements are influenced by popular dances and YouTube how-to videos. Formally they resemble tai-chi, synchronized swimming and the viral dance routine associated with the 1993 pop hit 'Macarena'. They are non-accumulative sequences that could repeat forever. The music, which moves across jangly arcadish bubble gum pop, deep bass and sentimental movie refrains, structures the piece more than anything else. The entire performance takes place on top of a patchwork 'screen' made of cheap plastic rain ponchos, tablecloths, shower curtains, a European Union flag and other colourful fabrics, which are gaffer-taped, rather than craft-fully stitched together. This 'screen' (which is also the stage) is lit with theatrical lighting, pinks, oranges and greens, clearly marking this space as distinct from the darker outer space of the audience. Surrounding the edges of the 'screen' are plentiful props, costumes and masks that the performers use and change into throughout. There is a vibe of youthful contemporaneity signified by the style and fashions of the performers, which are influenced by sporty cyber-punk aesthetics. There is also a transparent pitcher of water with some coins and several twenty-pound notes in it, the non-vegetarian waterproof kind. The pitcher is set atop two rolls of duct tape, underneath which a light shines, so that the money is visibly suspended in the water. At one point, the performers take turns pouring the money-infused water onto their armpits, producing the illusion of sweat – fake sweat. This is trickle-everywhere economics.

The audience, let's call them attendees, come and go as they please across the four hours, sit on cushions and bean bags dotted around the darkened edges or lounge against one another in a picnicking fashion. There are extension leads with plug sockets made available for attendees to plug in their laptops or charge their phones if they so wish. A microphone with a long lead curled into a deliberately visible form is placed on the floor among the audience but is never (potentially) used. Intermittently, the blue light of an audience member's device lights up their face. The space is more of a nod to than an imitation of hot desking culture and the co-working environment of post-industrial societies, the kind complete with soft furnishings that you might see in a trendy advertising agency, or at Google headquarters.

The scene produced by the audience does not look that different from the scene that takes place on stage, except the latter is exquisitely structured: the choreographies are rehearsed not improvised, although in between the routines the performers relax, chat quietly among themselves, scroll through their phones, browse comics, picnic, drink water, look at the playlist and control when the music starts and stops and when the next sequence begins. When the performers hang out between the sequences, there is a deeper scene and sense of relaxation in the audience too as subtle sounds of re-adjustment, arm stretches and waves of chatter lightly infiltrate the space.

There is a conjured and necessary atmosphere of relaxation in *fic.the.sky* – a kind of 'Netflix and chill' vibe. Paradoxically, much effort is made in sustaining a form of performance that is interesting to look at, but that does not always necessarily ask to be looked at. While the attitude of this work is open and relaxed, the performance is nevertheless seamlessly rehearsed, follows a clearly developed and structured score and sets up a deliberate theatrical fourth wall, which is maintained throughout as the performers never address or have eye contact with the audience. In some sense, this is theatre at its most traditional, theatre as representation. This is not, however, the middle-class domestic drama of the naturalist theatre, nor necessarily the surveillance theatre of reality television (although there are resemblances). Rather, a performance hangout draws its influence from the aestheticized relations (the 'non-scene') of online communities, digital fandom and open-source message boards. While this influence pervades *fic.the.sky*, the performance does not attempt to represent or parody social networks. Instead, there is a layering of motifs and actions beyond any double.

In this iteration, *fic.the.sky* was simultaneously performed for a live audience in situ, and live streamed online. The self-conscious hanging out of the performers, teamed with the constant (although discrete) changing of 'looks', enacts the hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 2000) of the selfie generation, acknowledging and making visible multiple acts of representation, pointing to process and performance over completed art object. Online viewers were also invited to 'hang out for as long as you want or just open a separate tab while you get on with other business' (Parry 2017). I was interested in making a performance for the attention economy of networked publics and precarious scrollers. How might we make a performance that does not ask to be looked at, but that might conjure the kind of attention conducive to thinking? How might this translate for an audience both in situ and online, who might have work to get on with, meetings to attend or social media feeds to scroll? How might a multiple-tab performance still inflect, or contaminate our experience, our work and our lives, even if the performance is just operating as background noise in situ or in a separate tab online? And how might the theorization of a performance hangout here, in some ways conjure such a hopeful dream, where writing itself becomes a kind of fiction or magic spell?

Armed with personal smartphones, laptops and tablets, attendees shift between watching the performance in situ and on Periscope/Twitter via their digital devices, where they can also pulse the heart emoji, comment and follow the interactions of online viewers. In a later iteration of this work at Edinburgh College of Art, the University of Edinburgh, participants were also invited to join a WhatsApp group, accessible via a QR (quick-response) code distributed among the audience, so they could communicate, and share comments and content as they watched.[note]4 Not so much 'alone together' (Turkle 2011), but rather together but alone... but together. The beanbags, acting like individual 'pods', also diagram, but never represent, the online network.

People fall asleep in a performance hangout and that is OK. Sleeping is permissible, and dozing in and out of sleep, between dreaming and wakefulness, is, unlike most traditional theatre in the West still today, a welcomed response.[note]5 There is no forcing yourself to stay awake in this show. Perhaps there is a potential in feeling allowed to sleep in the theatre. Sleep engages the unconscious as an alternative paradigm, but is also necessary as a respite in what some call 'the burnout society' (Han 2015 [2010]). Attendees have described the feeling of being

soothed, relaxed, mesmerized and bored in a performance hangout. Some have said that it created a space for quiet contemplation and that they wished they had some 'homework' to complete. Others, of more embodied feelings of liquidity and flying, akin to a long-haul flight. All symptomatic of its duration and algorithmic routines. Others also described the experience as addictive and not unlike clickbait, Pret A Manger or Coca-Cola. The state of addictive attachment that Pettman describes as our relationship to social media, and that I discuss at the beginning of this article, is harnessed through this performance via the non-accumulative choreographies, brightly coloured props and costumes and lack of any real beginning or end. In one repeated sequence a performer attaches a series of laminated click-baits (or are they memes?) to her back with Velcro. Something about teeth whitening. Another about dogs. Another, a gang bang? All flit before our very eyes each time this sequence 'pops up' in the performance, producing only a shell of sense but its intensity and vibration remaining. The performer moves quickly in a bunny-esque choreography, making it difficult to focus on any specifics in this infinite scroll performance. There is a sense that something might happen in a performance hangout, and it does, but it doesn't get better, more spectacular or more anything, and that is also the point. Real dogs and children are welcome at a performance hangout, and to my surprise seem to like it. The relaxed rhythms seemed to keep them quietly alive.

While I was not present 'on stage' or 'on screen', as the artist and co-creator of this work, I was very aware of my authoritative presence in the auditorium among the audience. Some thought was had about how I might co-exist in that space. In some way, although not explicitly, I also play a role, a kind of host. Although, again, this is not overtly performed or explicit as I move between watching the performance, chatting quietly with audience members, stretching my legs, moving to another spot in the audience, scrolling through my phone, commenting on the livestream, going out for a coffee or a pee and on times very discreetly... stroking an imaginary rabbit. This is a performance hangout.

Libidinal collocations and presence bleed

If performance is a meeting with a productive imperative albeit social, economic or political, then a hangout is its opposite: a non-meeting or an anti-meeting in which

there are supposedly no productive outcomes – just ‘good vibes’. I am grateful to the editors who reminded me that ‘good vibes’ are in fact a highly valued kind of productive outcome in current forms of capitalism. Operating within this economy (the knowledge economy), but in search of an alternative (‘an underground’ or ‘undercommons’, to reference Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s book (2013) of the same title), this project asks: what happens if we clash performance and the hangout together? Or, rather, what happens if we create a simultaneous temporality for a choreographed hangout, and a practice for hanging out across an extended duration in the theatre? What kind of pleasurable scene might emerge out of collocating or ‘clashing together’ a performance and a hangout?

In a discussion on ‘fully automated luxury communism’ (FALC), a concept that gained popularity within new materialist discourses, and that speculates that new automated technologies can liberate us from work, Mark Fisher and Judy Thorne build on Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1974) and suggest that ‘putting the concepts of “luxury” and “communism” together does not make much sense, and it’s from this lack of sense that a new idea emerges ... you create a kind of libidinal energy’ (Fisher and Thorne 2017: 145). Here, ‘luxury’ is not the acquiring of material assets, but the ‘luxury’ of having free leisure time beyond work. The speculation here is that automation will free us from the pernicious realities of precarious labour under neoliberalism. In another example, Melissa Gregg in her book *Work’s Intimacy* (2011) offers some further thinking regarding the ways new media technologies encourage and exacerbate tendencies among salaried professionals to put work at the heart of daily concerns, often at the expense of other sources of intimacy and fulfilment. Discussing the ways new media technologies from mobile phones to laptops and tablet computers have been incorporated as devices that give us the ‘freedom to work’ where we want, Gregg calls this impingement of work on personal lives, especially leisure and pleasure time, ‘presence bleed’ (2011: 2). This presence bleed economy and regime of infinite distraction is the symptom of the kind of cultural and political impotence and sense of there being ‘no alternative’ experienced in neoliberalism and outlined in Fisher’s book *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Perhaps performance, and the arts more generally, are thus generative practices for injecting libidinal energy back into these current regimes.

A performance hangout is not an illustration of FALC’s thesis, nor does it necessarily share the same desire for full automation. What it does share, however,

is the desire for alternative modes of being together through the clashing together of two seemingly opposing components. Not luxury and communism. But performance and hanging out. *fic.the.sky* reinstates in some sense the division of work and leisure, of performance and hanging out, but also undermines this division by encouraging audience members to 'plug in' and by inviting the performers to hangout, enacting both the maintenance, and potential undoing of Gregg's 'presence bleed' by making it available as both a simultaneous representation on stage, online and spectator practice. I want to turn now to the meeting of these two terms 'performance' and 'hangout', and to unpack their relationship as generative of a third concept: 'a performance hangout'.

Performance

Most conducive to thinking through the mode of performance activated in a performance hangout is the concept of fictioning developed by Dave Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, and enacted through their artistic collaboration and 'performance fiction' – Plastique Fantastique. In their book, *Fictioning: The myth function of contemporary art and philosophy* (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019), the artists describe fictioning as an open-ended, experimental practice that involves performing, diagramming or assembling to create or anticipate new modes of existence. In a relating article titled 'Performance fictions' (2011), Burrows writes: 'performance fictions differ from much performance art, in that they are not performances undertaken for the sake of education, critique or entertainment, or for the sake of deconstructing identity constructs or institutions'. As such, one might wonder what it is that fictioning is or does. Such wondering, performing, diagramming and assembling is collectively put to work in the collective performances of Plastique Fantastique, who refer to their work as a 'baroque practice' in which they 'activate immanence', 'harness affect', 'build probe heads' (there is a nod to science-fiction here) and 'actualize the virtual' via acts of 'stuttering and stammering' and 'folding' (O'Sullivan 2004). In place of the ontological theatres of performance art or the social and political incentives of the avant-garde, fictioning, as defined by Burrows and O'Sullivan, clearly draws its influence from the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari whose abstract desiring machines and systems ecology become

useful for understanding the function of performance practice beyond the human, and as an immanent, future-orientated practice for a 'people-yet-to-come'.

I too have followed this line of thought to think about the emergence of 'scenes' of performance. In a previous issue of *Performance Research*, 'On repetition', in my contribution titled 'Fictional Realness', I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of a minor literature (Parry 2015) to explore the emergence of performance practice in the New York drag balls of the 1980s as documented in Jennie Livingston's infamous documentary on the vogue scene *Paris is Burning* (1990). In brief, I explore how ballroom 'realness' is a kind of performance that moves beyond parody, gender imitation or class drag, functioning instead as a colloquial repetitious device, which *deterritorializes* (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) the major language ('the real') and subverts it from within, calling forth a new language ('realness'), and a new scene (the ballroom) (Parry 2015). This article also follows such a trajectory, at a time when a 'scene' is missing, or is, as pointed out earlier, 'represented to pieces' (Steyerl 2012). A performance hangout both stages a 'scene' of immanence and opens a parallel space and temporality for hanging out, for becoming-together, both online and in situ, working within and against the dominant modes of presence bleed and infinite distraction. I would add to this and suggest that the theatrical 'fourth wall' in *fic.the.sky* allows audiences to feel free of any burden to watch or participate, as well as relieving the performers of any burden to entertain the audience. The non-accumulative choreographies, costume changes, moments of hanging out, combined with slow duration, enable a layering of motifs and actions, which produces a density of affects and atmospheres, which in turn creates the conditions ('desiring production') for new modes of performance, attention and becoming-together.

Hangout

The hangout, as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is both 'a place where people meet to spend time together', and 'a website where people spend free time communicating with friends and sharing information and pictures' (*Cambridge Dictionary* 2019). As a practice often associated with young people, certain architectures come to mind – shopping malls or graffitied public monuments as charged sites for a teenage hangout. Since the advent of the Covid-19 global

pandemic, the hangout has been re-animated via virtual and online platforms, amping up the conference video call to enable meetings across disparate networks twenty-four hours a day. Fan communities meet in hangouts on the voice and instant messaging platform Discord to discuss or role-play their favourite musical band, actor or games, just as gamers watch and interact with one another on streaming apps like Twitch, playing and competing in real time across the globe.

The hangout, often associated with leisure time, crafting or wasting time can also be evidenced across a history of artistic performances, and bohemian countercultural activities. The hangout as a social mode of inhabitation where 'nothing really happens'. From the orientalist café cultures of the beat poets and the decadent flaneurs of the fin de siècle, through to the structured Happenings of Allan Kaprow, Yoko Ono or Yoyoi Kusama, the factory hangouts of Andy Warhol, and slow cinema of Ming-liang Tsai. The hangout is also evident in the relational aesthetics of Rirkrit Tirivanija in which gallery visitors sit and eat curry together, the durational reading rooms of Julia Bardlsey, or the 'porch sittings' of Lois Weaver, as well as the durational choreographic performances of Mårten Spångberg. *fic.the.sky* is a kind of fanfiction of Spångberg's performance *The Internet* (2015) – a sympathetic response, a remediation or a 'poor copy'. Most recently, *Nongkrong*, the Indonesian term for hanging out, became one of the principle concepts for Documenta XV (2022), a major international festival of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany, curated in this instance by Jakarta-based artist collective ruangrupa. Hanging out, doing nothing (or very little) in art, is particularly well-trodden terrain. As Sonja Dahl writes on the more recent appropriation of the Indonesian *nongkrong* by Indonesia-based artists and collectives: *nongkrong*, a form of hanging out translated literally as 'squatting by the side of the road with a cigarette' or 'sitting around because you're not doing any work', is not necessarily unproductive. Instead, Dahl (2016) sees it as 'akin to "non-productive time" – neither overtly goal-driven, nor unproductive in the capitalist sense ... *nongkrong* offers a holistic view of art as a long-term social process'. What is interesting about Dahl's discussion of the professionalization of *nongkrong* and thus incorporation into capitalist regimes is the author's consideration of its emergence out of a history of artist collectives and 'alternative spaces', which was once possible due to low rents, and increasingly less possible due to gentrification and globalization. Dahl (2016) also considers the penetration of 'new'

Western political and theoretical ideas onto *nongkrong* as a 'new kind of colonization'. The reference here is the frequent citation of Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) or Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) in the Indonesian context. While Dahl turns instead to Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons* (2013) to support the study, a text that has since then arguably gained an equally popular theoretical credibility; instead what *nongkrong* or hanging out more generally might be about, is *not* exercising control over who the hangout belongs to or *who* is hanging out (issues of inclusion and exclusion are inevitable and relationality is always and necessarily a fraught – agonistic or antagonistic – process); but rather the importance of the hangout, and its explicit need under current regimes of distraction, is in its idiosyncratic tendency towards process, sociality, experimentation, rehearsal and practice. In sum, a hangout is a practice for learning, not knowing.

Performance hangout

A performance hangout draws on these various histories (and futures) of the hangout, but also resituates the hangout in a contemporary economy where work and leisure are so often inseparable, and where smartphones and social networks encourage us to keep performing, keep participating and keep hanging out. In some sense, by staging a choreographed hangout (work) alongside a parallel hangout (leisure) off camera, in the darkened edges of the theatre; attendees become part of co-creating a permissible space for an immanent public to come and go, to hangout, sleep, chat, watch, daydream, work and interact via personal digital devices. All without the pressure of the 'other', the pressure to 'be seen' and 'be scene', or the pressure to totally 'switch off'. For now, at least. It is important to note here, that while *fic.the.sky* sets up the conditions for an immanent 'scene' of people coming and going (it was programmed with free entry at the Midlands Art Centre where those enjoying a Sunday stroll through Birmingham's Cannon Hill Park might come across the work at the art centre ground floor studio theatre); it is nevertheless subject to the same issues of exclusivity that Dahl mentions in regards to *nongkrong* in the artistic context. Fierce is an international festival of provocative performance, and *The New Inquiry* an online magazine of contemporary critical ideas, each with its

own primed publics. The online streaming of *fic.the.sky* effectively brought in the region of 3,000 more visitors to the work than those who attended Fierce, but again further limitations still apply in terms of the kind of experience for online viewers versus those in situ. Perhaps, as a diagram, a practice and an immanent 'thing' – a performance hangout is best considered a rehearsal or practice for a kind of future meeting as opposed to an ideal prototype.

Endless meetings

I want to turn now to the title of this article, 'Freedom is a performance hangout', which is admittedly more a cheap meme of Francesca Polletta's book *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* (2002) than a committed re-working of her study of participatory democracy and socio-political movements of late twentieth-century America. My re-appropriation here has some reasoning. Polletta's study celebrates the bottom-up decision-making of left-wing trade unionist, the proto-feminist women's liberation movement and anti-capitalist activism. Her argument purposefully demonstrates how many non-political forms of meeting, including friendships, tutelage and religious fellowship, can also foster values that run counter to democracy, such as exclusivity and aversion to rules. The phrase 'freedom is an endless meeting', a quote taken directly from one of Polletta's interviewees, chimes quite explicitly with the premise of a performance hangout. Except that the 'scenes' of collectivity and democracy in Polletta's book, where the path to freedom and emancipation is through the pain, boredom and frustration of political organizing and attending meetings, has since been dispersed into sprawling global networks of infinite distraction.

The presence bleed of life both online and offline, teamed with the post-Fordist, neoliberal model of work, where leisure time is subsumed into worktime and vice versa, has (it feels like) actualized Polletta's endless meeting. Except, as Jeremy Gilbert points out in his book *Common Ground*, our perception of the meeting as a practice for democratic relationality or collectivity, as it once was in Polletta's case studies, has been grossly contaminated by the corporatization of the meeting, making the very idea of meetings 'impotent' and 'undesirable'. Gilbert writes, 'the very reason why we habitually tend to think of meetings as boring,

frustrating and disagreeable is because neoliberal post-democratic culture conspires to make them so' (2013: 212). I am also grateful to the editors for pointing out here that the corporatization of meeting could be said to precede neoliberalism by a few hundred years in the evolving practice of state diplomacy, governmentality and colonialism – long before its uptake in the sphere of work. There are *still* too many meetings, but not of the collective democratic kind accounted for in Polletta's study. Neoliberalism works specifically 'to enhance our creative capacities while inhibiting any attempt to put them to work in a collective, political, democratic fashion' (Gilbert 2013: 212). For Gilbert, 'it is precisely the endlessness (boundlessness, infinity) of the meetings (relationality, joyous affect) in which we participate that is the only true index of a freedom that can never simply be "ours"' (211). This article, 'Freedom is a performance hangout', stages this search for other ways of 'being together'; ways that are free of the burden and frustration of the endless meeting, and ways that pay attention to and harness the infinite distraction that so often prevents meeting today.

Zero stakes

A performance hangout, this libidinal collocation can perhaps remind us of the pleasures of being together without demands. The slow tactility and trusty synchronicity of the ensemble performance in *fic.the.sky* stages a practice for 'becoming-collective', minus the adrenaline of the orgy. Such scenes of collective erotic bodily pleasures evoked and explicitly staged across numerous examples in the Western avant-garde, from The Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* (1969) to Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964), have in some sense lost their edge (as Steyerl reminds us we are already 'in bits'). They demand too much of the infinitely distracted. Perhaps just for this moment, the stakes are too high in an orgy, and too burdensome.⁶ In a performance hangout, a non-accumulative practice for 'becoming-collective', the stakes are low; or rather, there are zero stakes. Unlike the fully fledged professional meeting or ecstatic orgy, a performance hangout is not an established practice, a situation or a new medium. It is a constellation, a concept. It is an evolving assemblage of elements, including theatrical performance (work) and hanging out (leisure), both physical and virtual, and older forms of theatrical performance and social meeting now diagrammed in novel articulations and via new media. We should thus not make the mistake to reify 'it' into a stable object. In the

darkened edges of the theatre, a performance hangout might offer the conditions for producing 'the undercommons', an ungovernable realm of social life, the 'scene' where we make meaning with one another (Moten and Harney 2013), or at least where some 'homework' might be undertaken.

fic.the.sky, a performance hangout that I have diagrammed and discussed across this article, is a practice in search of a meeting – in search of a 'scene'. The title is a broken weblink, but also an imperative 'fic it': *fic.the.sky*. An antidote to the antagonisms of the avant-garde, punk or the anarchist's two fingers, whose rage is already subsumed into capital and sold on as a cheap T-shirt. *fic.the.sky*. A process in search of autonomous pleasure. The 'fic' in the title *fic.the.sky* is both an abbreviation for fic-tion(ing), and a kind of Fluxus instruction for the computer age. When salvaged JPEGs of cutesy cats and fascist memes become monuments of digital democracy, a performance hangout seeks a future glimpsed in the erotic tension between performance and hanging out, work and leisure, the utopic but always unobtainable sky and one another.

Notes

1 Medeber Teatro in this instance included performers Serenella Martufi, Francesco Moraca and Alice Labant.

2 A performance hangout has been developed across a series of performances, artist residencies and workshops from 2015 to 2019, including Steakhouse Live (2015), National Theatre Wales (2017), Fierce Festival (2017), Reaching/Outreaching TaPRA: Theatre, performance philosophy (2018) and Edinburgh College of Art (2019). A version of this article, titled 'A performance hangout', was presented at *Humanities and The Arts: Creative industries and cultural democracy*, ECHIC Conference 2019, the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, Greece, 4–5 April 2019. I am also grateful to The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, which supported the development of 'A Performance Hangout' through a postdoctoral digital scholarship, October 2018–August 2019.

3 'Playbour', first coined by the video-game theorist Julian Kücklich, is a critical term that can be applied to any interaction, simulated or networked experience that uses the techniques of play (absorption, immersion, repetition, recombination) to extract some kind of labour from a user that might contribute to a corporate bottom-line (Kücklich 2005; see also The Rodina 2015).

4 I am grateful to Katie Hawthorne for the suggestion to use QR codes for the audience to join a dedicated WhatsApp group at 'a performance hangout (off offline)' at Edinburgh College of Art in June 2019.

5 For discussions on falling asleep in the theatre see Shenton (2022) and Truman (2010). See also Duckie's *Lullaby* (2011) presented at the Barbican Pit theatre, an overnight show that intentionally invites audiences to sleep.

6 Ben Walters has developed an interesting account of high versus low stakes in performance. Discussing Duckie's *Posh Club*, he writes about the 'low-stakes environment, supporting new kinds of confidence, understanding and relationality and enabling fun and fabulous experiments' (Walters 2020: 328).

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