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Exploring Collective Memory and Trauma through a Site-Specific Performance in Lazaretta

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Abstract

The work presented revolves around a site-specific performance held at the public space of Lazaretta - a historic Sanatorium in Syros (Greece). The aim of this empirical research was to outline the embodied sense of collective trauma through isolation. The research suggests that the collective memory connected to specific historical places and approached through body and digital culture strengthens the social consciousness and the sense of self.

Keywords: collective memory, historical trauma, embodiment, movement, isolation

Exploring Collective Memory and Trauma

This study explores the connection between embodied movement and collective trauma related to isolation (Audergon, 2004; Hirschberger, 2018) through a site-specific performance that took place in Syros, at the historical building of Lazaretta, as part of the Eye's Walk Digital Festival¹. Lazaretto, originally an abandoned stone complex utilized as a cholera quarantine hospital, later served as a prison and mental asylum.

¹ Site-specific choreography: Georgia-Konstantina Antzampou - Proastio Art Centre Dance research company. Performers/ co-creators: Sofia Almpani, Liana Giozou, Aphrodite Kalafati, Anna Ouzounidou, Eleni Tsantali. Music "Eros": Liana Giozou. Video installations: "Peripheral" - Katina Bitsicas, "Reach" - Alice Karveli, "Unravel Rois" - Andrew Duggan. Poem "therapeutic breathing": Petros Stefanias

Our research hypothesis was based on a holistic perspective of the living body, building on previous studies such as the research conducted by Ehrsson (2007), Fraleigh (1987), Ionta et al. (2011), Schmalzl, Crane-Godreau, and Payne (2014), Sheets-Johnstone (2015), and Van der Kolk (1994). According to Hirschberger collective trauma is defined as “*the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society*” (Hirschberger, 2018, p.1). We use the term “*trauma*” to encapsulate the shared experiences intertwined with local history (Alexander, 2004; Maxwell, 2014; Sotero, 2006).

The key objectives are: 1) to examine the link between embodied movement and collective trauma; 2) to analyze how historical places influence collective memory and social consciousness; 3) to investigate the dancers' emotional and physical experiences through embodied interactions; and 4) to study how interdisciplinary collaboration and technological creativity express these elements.

Methodology

Five dancers devised a walking performance from the Harbor to Lazaretta. The performers were instructed to explore the themes of love and death. These themes emerged from the sanatorium's history and the analysis from a song called “Strong as death is Love” (Rocha & Burton, 2017). The performance was enriched by original electronic music. Three video art installations were projected onto Lazaretta's facades, transforming the building and creating a space for large-scale artistic expression.

The dancers interacted with residents of Syros and global participants, and they reflected their experience by answering five open-ended questions. The questions were based on the practice of contact improvisation, mindfulness and reflective practice (Behnke, 2003; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2009; Moon, 2013). The answers are presented below:

1. How did you feel about getting close to locals?
 - There was a desire to come close to them.
 - More comfortable than walking alone.
 - I felt like they wanted to show me what the building means to them.
 - I think they wanted me to do that.
 - I thought it would be stressful but it wasn't.
2. How easy was it for you to be physically isolated from the other dancers?
 - Actually, it was really difficult.
 - When I did it, I felt sad somehow.

- I was feeling that I needed to be close to someone in order to be safe.
 - It was not.
 - I think I was searching other bodies through my movement.
3. Were there any pictures related to isolation, love and death that emerged from this procedure?
- White color, paleness and pain.
 - Separation and pain.
 - Desperate faces and pain.
 - I thought of isolated people and the desire to live.
 - People being isolated from the outside world but together in a room.
3. How did you feel about your dance partners?
- Glad we were together.
 - Support.
 - Safety.
 - Creating together.
 - Gratitude.
5. Describe the whole experience with one sentence.
- A well-shared experience.
 - It was emotional.
 - Knowledge through senses.
 - I felt connected with the memory and the people.
 - I felt all the aspects of emotions.

Findings

This site-specific synthesis illustrates how collective memories can be expressed and materialized through movement, embodied arguments, and augmented elements.

The performers experienced profound emotional proximity, intensified desire for physical closeness, and a shared historical awareness of confinement and pain. The involvement of residents and participants extended the sensory experience into a record of collective historical memory. In fact, embodied argumentation has been used as a collaborative, creative tool in other approaches (Garibaldi and Zmolek, 2015; Du et al., 2017; Barnard and deLahunta, 2017; Almpani et al., 2023; 2024).

While the study provided valuable insights into the connection between embodied movement and collective trauma, several limitations remain. First, as a case study with a small number of participants, the findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, the perspectives of the local community on the experience were not explored. The study lacked

the use of standardized evaluation tools, with limited emphasis on the role of bodily senses. Future research could investigate how embodied dialogue contributes to trauma expression in groups with shared experiences, as well as the role of technology in them.

Conclusion

The research indicated that collective memory tied to historical sites, when approached through embodied movement, plays a crucial role in enhancing both social consciousness and the sense of self.

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