Flashmobs as Performance and the Re-emergence of Creative Communities

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ABSTRACT – **Flashmobs as Performance and the Re-emergence of Creative Communities –** In spite of their very brief history – the first modern flashmob took place at Macy's in NY, on the evening of 17th of June 2003 – flashmobs have rapidly spread throughout the Western world, developing in recent years into a particularly novel mode of performance that stimulates the re-emergence – even if temporary and fleeting – of creative communities, whilst responding to a range of topics of societal currency: political, cultural, artistic, everyday life etc. Flashmobs become visible within the public sphere via short, exciting performative acts perceived as playful and liberating. In processual terms, flashmobs as performances pertaining to a globalized, neo-liberal cultural economy, hybridize conventions and practices from live, online, and mobile media in novel, unprecedented ways.
Keywords: **Flashmobs. Performance. Hybridization. Creative Communities. Active Spectatorship.**

RÉSUMÉ – *Flashmobs* **comme Performance: la réémergence de communautés créatives** – En dépit de leur très courte histoire – le premier *flashmob* moderne a eu lieu chez *Macy* à New York, le 17 Juin 2003 au soir – les *flashmobs* se sont répandus rapidement dans tout le monde occidental et se sont transformés dans les dernières années en ce qui peut sans doute être défini comme une manière nouvelle et contemporaine de performance qui vise à stimuler la réémergence – même si temporaire et éphémère – de communautés créatives. En tant que performances, elles répondent à un éventail de sujets de société (politique, culturel, artistique, quotidien etc.). Les *Flashmobs* deviennent visibles dans la sphère publique par de courtes interventions publiques, performatives et poignantes, perçues comme ludiques et libératrices. En termes de processus, les *flashmobs*, envisagés en tant que spectacles se rapportant à une culture mondialisée, néolibérale, mélangent des conventions esthétiques et médiatiques et engagent le spectateur dans le processus créatif de manière nouvelle et inattendue.
Mots-clés: *Flashmobs.* **Performance. Hybridation. Communautés Créatives. Spectateur Actif.**

RESUMO – **O Flashmob como Performance e o Ressurgimento de Comunidades Criativas –** Apesar de terem aparecido há pouco tempo – o primeiro *flashmob* moderno ocorreu na loja *Macy's* de Nova York, na noite de 17 de junho de 2003 – os *flashmobs* espalharam-se rapidamente por todo o mundo ocidental, tornando-se, nos últimos anos, uma forma inovadora de performance que estimula o reaparecimento – ainda que passageiro e evanescente – de comunidades criativas ao passo que respondem a uma gama de tópicos de relevância social: políticos, culturais, artísticos, cotidianos etc. Os *flashmobs* tornam-se visíveis dentro da esfera pública por intermédio de atos performativos breves e chamativos, percebidos como lúdicos e libertadores. Em termos de processo, os *flashmobs* como performances, pertencem a uma economia cultural neo-liberal globalizada. Eles hibridizam convenções e práticas das mídias ao vivo, *online* e móveis de maneiras inovadoras e inéditas.
Palavras-chave: *Flashmobs.* **Performance. Hibridização. Comunidades Criativas. Espectador Ativo.**

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The notion of flashmobs as an emerging, novel format for performance, holding participatory and emancipatory possibilities that have the potential to bridge the much dreaded gap between spectating and performing, and lead to the re-emergence – even if apparently temporary or fleeting – of creative communities within the public sphere, is stimulated by the recent *explosion* of this particular performative practice within the public realm, in the past five years. Taking place in the most varied and unexpected Western urban settings and/or online, the resurgence of flashmobs is characterised by a wide diversity of topics and performative approaches and a particular type of impact – playful and liberating, often displaying incongruous humour, always sanctioning current societal or political (mainstream) values, issues, or topics in a way unspecific to other performative manifestations. In spite of their brief format, irregular occurrence and apparent spontaneity, if we were to refer to traditional and well-established notions of creative process and live presentation/re-presentation flashmobs are performance, in terms of production, presentation, and reception. This study will attempt to argue in favour of such a hypothesis and articulate a definition of flashmobs as performance mainly by drawing on Howard Rheingold's theory of smart mobs, defined as groups of people that use digital and mobile technologies to enhance their possibilities of cooperation towards social and/or political goals (Rheingold, 2002), on theories of devising and collective collaboration pertaining to the realm of post-dramatic performance, as summarised by Govan, Nicholson and Normington (2007), as well as similarities (in terms of intentions and ethos) with performative practices of the historical avant-gardes. Although the history of modern flashmobs is only ten years old and their recognition, or better said acknowledgement as a current phenomenon, and an increasingly popular cultural practice within the public sphere is even more recent, similarities in terms of attitude towards artistic practices and socio-cultural ethos can be tracked down to earlier manifestations of the collective and the performative, by looking at the historical avant-gardes[1]. DADA manifestations, rapidly spreading across Europe between the 1916-1924 and the happenings of the 1960s, as collectively authored, interdisciplinary, live events with strong performative, participatory and emancipatory potential that aimed to reconnect and reconciliate art with everyday life and,

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thus, recuperate lost societal values are amongst them. A genealogy of flashmobs as performance could be tracked down historically, notwithstanding the existing temporal gaps and the aesthetic and medial differences pertaining to historical and contingent factors. However, in line with and, also, as a response to the pervasiveness of the digital environment and the neo-liberal, globalized thinking that tends to characterise Western culture at this moment in time, flashmobs constitute a particularly novel mode of performance, presented to the public both live and (afterwards) via recorded visuals, disseminated mostly through social media channels such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and/or other various, specialised blogs.

The act of spectatorship in the case of flashmobs is, therefore, quintessentially transformed into a bi-folded act, taking place both live and online. Possibilities of response and participation are extended in time and in terms of media available, and can become more complex and potentially more rewarding for the community involved, in relation to the purpose and content of performance, than within the traditional situation of live performance. This happens irrespective of the particularities in terms of spectatorship and the degree of participation inscribed within the dramaturgy of the flashmob, in its live performed part. Moreover, the act of spectatorship merges, in the case of flashmobs, at least to a certain extent, with the act of performing. It combines witnessing and active participation (albeit in varying degrees) within the situation of live performance in public settings, but also online, through the response instigated, or simply by the further dissemination of info via afore mentioned online based media channels. Thus, hybridized notions of collaboration and participation, pertaining to live, online and mobile media become inherent to flashmobs as performance, and happen across a range of live and digital platforms.

Flashmobs gain visibility and are considered successful as unusual, yet stimulating and momentarily meaningful performative acts within the public sphere in relation to three main factors: a) societal and/or political currency of the particular topic proposed; b) unusual style of performative presentation and/or re-presentation – bearing a certain note of originality and stimulating the participatory, creative potential of the community addressed in a playful, non-threatening way; and c) impact in terms of reception, both live and

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online – which ultimately refers to the numbers of likes, shares, posts via digital and mobile media platforms, and the quality of comments via the chosen platforms.

According to data available online[2], the first successful modern flashmob occurred on the evening of 17th of June 2003, in New York, at Macy's department store and stimulated instant reaction, live and online. Judith A. Nicholson, in *FCJ-030 Flash! Mobs in the Age of Mobile Connectivity* states:

> The first flash mobbing is legendary now, though not uncontested. It happened in Manhattan, New York, between 7:27 pm and 7:37 pm on June 17, 2003. Summoned by text messages, emails and blog banter, a crowd of approximately 100 people gathered in the home furnishing section of Macy's department store. The crowd surrounded a rug with a $10,000 price tag. Participants, soon to be known as 'flash mobbers', were instructed beforehand by 'moberators' to tell the salespeople that they all lived together in a free-love commune and that they wanted to purchase a 'love rug' (Bedell, 2003; Cotroneo, 2003; Shmueli, 2003; van Rijn, 2003). According to several accounts, the mob dispersed rapidly after spending ten minutes discussing the rug among themselves and with salespeople (Nicholson, 2005, n.p.).

Sean Savage – responsible for coining the term in 2003 and self-proclaimed *instigator* for the blog *cheesebikini?* – maintains that the first flashmob was organised by Bill Wasik[3] and was extensively documented on the afore mentioned blog, which followed up closely the appearance and development of the modern flashmob between 2003 and 2008[4]. According to Savage, between the 17th of June and the 10th of September 2003, several other flashmobs happened in Manhattan and around the world. For instance, a Matrix mob in Japan was reported two days later, where hundreds of *clones* of the character Agent Smith converged in Osaka and Tokyo, following the Japan premiere of Matrix reloaded. In Rome, a month later, over three hundred flash mobbers invaded a music and bookstore, where they spent several minutes asking employees for nonexistent books before applauding and then dispersed (Savage, 2003, n.p.). In spite of the unexpected media coverage – and as it happens with all great inventions – the flashmob craze was as short lived and as *flashy* as one would think, at the time, and the trend was declared dead by September 2003 (Nicholson, 2005). A period of relative

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break followed, whereby flashmobs occurred sporadically, gained less public attention. Nevertheless, in the past six years, a resurgence of flashmobs happening in the most diverse geographical and public locations, proposing a much wider and complex range of topics and far more evolved dramaturgies could be observed, leading to the present hypothesis that flashmobs are, in fact, a new, developing mode of performance, pertaining to the 21st century, and their occurrence cannot be treated with a whimsical smile anymore.

In 2004, only one year after the first modern flashmob was publicly performed, the term appeared in the Oxford Dictionary with the following definition: "[...] a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again[5]" (Savage, 2004, n.p.). Whilst the notion of complete strangers is somehow superficial, or rather inadequate, since practice has demonstrated beyond doubt that there is always an *instigator* (a person, or a group of people) in charge with the organisation, or better said production of the event before, during and after the actual moment of public performance, notions of brevity, publicly performed action, and the quintessential use of mobile and web technologies of communication in setting up the live performing act are recognised as essential. The Oxford entry in itself can constitute a proof of the flashmobs' sudden impact within the public sphere. Currently still, flashmobs are defined by Wikipedia not as events, but as a "[...] group of people who assemble suddenly in a place, perform an unusual and seemingly pointless act for a brief time, then disperse, often for the purposes of entertainment, satire, and artistic expression[6]". Notions of briefness, and of the live, publicly performed act appear in this definition, too. Additionally, the purpose of artistic expression is present. Acknowledged medial modes of organization and dissemination of information pre- and post- live performing moments include telecommunications, social media, or viral emails. The Wikipedia webpage for flashmobs[7] does not recommend applying the term to events and performances organized for the purposes of politics (such as protests), commercial advertisement, publicity stunts, or the performative dissemination of artistic work. However, the current understanding of the term as it is, in fact, reflected through various mass-media accounts and online channels used by communities of flashmobbers, as well as current

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parlance does not seem to consider relevant to differentiate between smart mobs and flashmobs in terms of their impact and role within the public sphere. Therefore, I suggest that this non-differentiation of terminology in relation to practice is not particularly relevant for the purposes of the present study, and that the terms, in light of their usage, could be understood as interchangeable within the current context, with the corollary that the notion of flashmobs has definitely gained currency over the notion of smart mobs, in relation to the practice ostensible in recent years. Consequently, I suggest that due to their flexibility and rather *loose*, flexible format and, most importantly, due to the ostensible sense of individual self expression through collective ownership and manifestation in relation to artistic expression that is associated with flashmobs, the term has evolved to include both types of performative interventions in the public sphere.

Moreover, I suggest that flashmobs prove to be performative acts that reconnect individuals with their environment, in a collective and creative, playful manner, challenge the everyday life routine and the associated mainstream, passive mode of thinking and relating to the environment, and most importantly happen in a brief, definite interval of time – briefness is essential for impact! – whilst instigating spectators (passers-by, or digital audiences) to become actively engaged in the act of performing their momentarily self collectively, either through bodily involvement and/or further dissemination of visually recorded content. Also, I suggest that, in spite of their apparent spontaneity and lack of preparedness (acknowledged as such based on more or less traditional models of creative process), flashmobs are performance in the sense that they require a period of production that includes, besides organizational aspects pertaining to the effective gathering of people in a specific, well chosen place, at a specific time, a period of rehearsals (even if brief, and/or performed remotely by participants) and, most importantly, they require the development of a specific dramaturgy, that favours experience rather than narration. Flashmobs are furthermore performance, as they include the act of public presentation, or (in some instances) re-presentation of an adapted routine in a specific context/setting that becomes, thus, performative, according to a pre-established, flexible dramaturgy, and they integrate, as a novel factor, the act of spectatorship potentially manifesting itself both live and online, within this process. All flashmobs, whilst being performed live, are

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filmed and photographed by organisers (and often also by passers-by) and the resulting visual documentation is carefully, yet quickly edited in line with the dramaturgy of the flashmob, in order to be disseminated afterwards via social and digital media platforms. Therefore, both the creative process and the act of performing cross-over from the live into the digital and, indirectly, demonstrate a pre-existing, discrete planning and strategy for *showcasing* flashmobs as artistic work with a particular purpose, likely to inform a potential legacy of the flashmob as performance. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that through their very occurrence in the public sphere and the particular dramaturgy they propose, that openly attempts to disrupt the every-day life flow and challenge the mainstream societal discourse, flashmobs are implicitly political, as they tend to sanction current values and issues. Flashmobs are, thus, performances that hold a strong emancipatory potential, increasingly perceived by the most diverse range of communities, as far too numerous examples across the globe recently attest. The latest example is the flashmob organised in Stockholm in support of Taksim Square, on the 15th of June 2013, less than three weeks after the demonstrations in Istanbul, in support of Gezi Park, started[8]. Lastly, I suggest that due to their interdisciplinarity – merging conventions and practices pertaining to social media, computing and mobile communication technologies, as well as performing media – flashmobs hold the promise to develop even further their performative potential, and they (already) situate themselves discreetly within the realm of the post-dramatic, participatory performance.

Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access* (2002) states that smart mobs consist of people able to "[...] act in concert, even if they do not know each other" (Rheingold, 2002, p. XII). More than a decade ago the author predicted that:

> The killer apps of tomorrow's mobile infocom industry won't be hardware devices or software programs, but social practices. The most far-reaching changes will come, as they often do, from the kinds of relationships, enterprises, communities, and markets that the infrastructure makes possible (Rheingold, 2002, p. XII).

Rheingold's statement sounds like a prophecy that came true in many areas of our current existence, beyond doubt. Referring to

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mobile devices and the rapidly evolving computing technologies, Rheingold maintained (at the time) that they would help people coordinate actions "[...] with others around the world – and perhaps more importantly, with people nearby" (Rheingold, 2002, p. XIII), thus leading to increased efficiency and impact in terms of public interaction and exchange, and most importantly to the development of "[...] social contracts that were never possible before". Rheingold envisioned that the way people "[...] meet, mate, work, fight, buy, sell, govern, and create" was already starting to change and those changes would occur rapidly and develop in directions not imagined before (Rheingold, 2002, p. XIII). In sum, mobile and computing technologies would enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before, and, moreover, use their newly found collective power in creative ways, unexplored before. This sounds like the ideal terrain for a potential shaping up of flashmobs as means of collective self-expression before their actual occurrence. However, nothing is entirely new. As the author himself maintains, referring to smart mobs – which for the purpose of this argumentation is entirely likely to be applied to flashmobs: "The power of smart mobs comes in part from the way age-old social practices surrounding trust and cooperation are being mediated by new communication and computation technologies" (Rheingold, 2002, p. XIX). Rheingold's assertion, in fact, relates to the participatory values embedded in a whole range of new media devices and their emerging associated practices, which arguably hold the potential to become essential in stimulating creativity and the expression of individuality within a collective, even if it happens within circumstances that are apparently fleeting and momentary.

Collective collaboration (as the practice was labelled initially on the North American continent) and, further on, devising strategies and contemporary collaborative techniques of making performance within current Western landscape, in their openly expressed attempt to emancipate from the *tyranny of the text* and of single authorship, developed a vast array of strategies of making performance that are collective in their nature, and involve trust and collaboration. Indirectly, the resulting performative outcomes tend to connect to the idea of enhancing and/or activating spectatorship and attempt to emancipate it from a passive, exclusively aesthetic, and contemplative

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attitude in reception. The notion of devising is actually described by Govan, Nicholson and Normington in *Making Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* (2007), in relation to the plural, and therefore the collective, as "[...] processes of experimentation, and sets of creative strategies" (Govan; Nicholson; Normington, 2007, p. 7) towards the development of a score, a dramaturgy or of *performance-as-text*. One of the distinguishing features of devising is, thus, its collaborative nature and inherent emancipatory potential, both in terms of artistic and/or political expression, but also in terms of production. Ideas, actions, movements are generated collaboratively, most often through a mixture of discussion, improvisation, and experimentation. According to the authors there is no single aesthetic or ideological objective to devising. The landscape is eclectic, depending on skills, abilities, taste, or purpose of devising (Govan; Nicholson; Normington, 2007, p. 7-9). Implicitly notions of trust and cooperation become quintessential to any successful devising process and outcome. Indirectly, also, interdisciplinarity becomes one of the aspects quasi-present and more or less permanent in devised practices. This all happens in a situation of live interaction throughout the process of making, and prior to the moment(s) of performance presentation.

However, the current possibilities offered by social and mobile media and the related social practices discussed above, have the ability to make such live interaction happen, in quintessential terms and to an extended degree remotely, without the expressed need for face-to-face interaction, at all points, throughout the period of production. Or, if live interaction happens, not all members involved in the public presentation have to be present, as viral emails, social and mobile media ensure ways of effective communication. Nevertheless, in the act of presentation, or re-presentation creative community members have to share the same live space in order for the performance to develop, as with more traditional devising practices. Judith A. Nicholson in her study notes that:

> Flash mobbing was described as 'self organized entertainment' (Rheingold, 2003b), hailed as 'a startling intervention in the life of the city' (Young, 2003), likened to 'speed dating' (Nold, 2003) and labelled 'an incipient form of social protest' (Shnayerson and Goldstein, 2003: 20) (Nicholson, 2005, n.p.).

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Nicholson asks herself: "Why was a trend often described as 'silly fun' so hotly contested?" (2005, n.p.). And she maintains that the reason was "[...] the unprecedented conjuncture in flash mobbing of three types of mobile communicating: mobile texting, targeted mobbing, and public performing" (Nicholson, 2005, n.p.). Nicholson further argues that: "[...] the conjuncture of these practices – and the popularization of flash mobbing in urban public spaces at this juncture in history – made the trend a significant moment in the history of mobile communication" (Nicholson, 2005, n.p.). The author refers, of course, to the 2003 moment. However, the re-emergence of flashmobs in the past years, and the diversification of topics, goals and performative strategies witnessed can only lead one to believe that the potential of flashmobs as performance in its own right started to be acknowledged and furtherly explored, mainly via acquiring an enriching a dramaturgy of experience that involves also devising practices within the creative process.

Already in 1987, Marco de Marinis describes dramaturgy as "[...] the techniques/theory governing the composition of performance-as-text" (de Marinis; Dwyer, 1987, p. 100), where the notion of text refers not only to the written word, but to the scoring of behaviours, scenic items, words, images, and all other aspects pertaining to theatrical language. Thus, in asserting a dramaturgy of experience at the confluence been the digital, social, mobile, and performing media, one can only state that flashmobs are performances that instigate spectators into becoming active participants, that can be considered performers in a dramaturgical sense. This implies doing, a physical interaction with objects, ideas, or people, and the act of doing relates to experience, as engagement that involves and stimulates the sensorial or tactile besides the other senses, more traditionally used in performance, such as seeing and hearing. With the new, intricate inter-relationship/hybridization of media related practices discussed above and social practices of face-to-face interaction, on daily life, the potential for increased creativity and the possibilities of achieving a sense of liberating self – expression within the collective (in this instance becoming a creative community for a brief period of time) are inevitably enhanced. Thus, the flashmob as a novel mode of performance proves to be one of the effective outlets through which such a manifestation occurs within the public realm.

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The *Michael Jackson Tribute* flashmob, held in Bucharest on the afternoon of 29th of August 2009, as part of the global tributes organised in the memory of the iconic pop artist, was meant to bring homage to the Jackson's work and spirit and to bring together, in a creative, playful manner potential Romanian fans. Such flashmob tributes occurred in many important cities such as: Stockholm, Paris, Seattle, London etc., throughout the months of July and August 2009, following the artist's untimely death, and their video-recordings went viral immediately, with the number of YouTube viewings oscillating between half a million and over seven millions since. Flashmobs were deemed as potentially the most creative, engaging way to pay tribute to such a popular pop star, amongst all other manifestations in his memory that took place at the time. The same song and video clip – *Beat It* (1982) – was used as base for devised choreographies in all flashmobs, whilst central, highly circulated locations of major cities were targeted, to attract attention. According to online feedback following, however, the Stockholm and the Bucharest tributes seems to have been considered the most successful and deemed complex in terms of the dramaturgy proposed, with highly positive comments with regards to the professional/aesthetic quality of the dance routine performed as part of the Bucharest flashmob.

click on the image to watch online

Video 1 - *Michael Jackson Official Tribute Flash Mob-Bucharest, Romania*, courtesy of Judith State & Mircea Ghinea. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/embed/GI-AIRJYrLo?>.

According to the main *instigators* – Romanian dancers/choreographers Judith State and Mircea Ghinea – the organisation and preparation was both intensive and intense (happening over less than a week), and used targeted emailing, mobile and social media,

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as well as live interaction (consultation) between key organisers, as means of communication, based on practices involving trust and collaboration, to speak with Rheingold. The two choreographers started with deciding upon the key places in which the flashmob would be performed. Four main locations were chosen: Herastrau Park, Central Station, Romania Plaza Mall, and Magheru Boulevard, at the intersection with Romana Square. The choice combined principles of diversity, representativity for the city's current identity, and potential affluence of population most likely to engage with such an endeavour. An accessible choreographic routine, less than one minute long and inspired by the iconic Michael Jackson in the video-clip *Beat It*, was devised collectively. Video instructions, containing the choreography, designed and explained in a way accessible for learning to at home, by any non-specialist in dance, were recorded and distributed via targeted emailing. The moment was devised, also, in a manner evocative of the spirit of the cult video-clip and the personality of the pop artist to which it paid homage, as well as carefully thought through to stimulate passers-by, enabling them to engage spontaneously in participation, whether joining the liberating dance routine, taking pictures, or simply cheering or applauding.

click on the image to watch online

Video 2 - *Michael Jackson Tribute Bucharest- 5 minutes lesson- Dance steps,* courtesy of Judith State & Mircea Ghinea. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/embed/cb_tpz-QKzo?>.

Following the *prompts* sent to friends and acquaintances email, asking for expressions of interest and commitment, a small ensemble, with the two instigators in the front line as leading dancers, was formed. A school backyard was used to rehearse to ensure synchronicity and accuracy in choreographic terms, the day

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before the flashmob. The ensemble's role was to institute itself as the performing core of the flashmob, to ensure its immediate visibility within the public sphere, as well as to stimulate/instigate, or lead by example, passers-by that decided to join the flashmob on the spot.

Additionally, in order to ensure a smooth and uninterrupted unfolding of the overall event, and in line with Romanian laws for public gathering and the rules of flashmobs, instigators sought official approval for performing in all the public places chosen, but succeeded only partially, which increased the risk factor of the event and implicitly the level of commitment for the participants committed in advance. State and Ghinea, also, organised a sound and video professional team that would deal with the logistics of the event, making sure on one hand that music was at appropriate levels to attract attention in such busy places and stimulate passers-by, and on the other hand that flashmob moments were documented from various, inconspicuous/non-intrusive angles, for further video editing and online dissemination. Volunteers acted as stagehands and helped out with the set-up and get-out of the complex sound and video system, in less than 10 minutes, in each location. Less than 24 hours before the start, the instigators disseminated, via collective text messaging, to those who had confirmed participation, info regarding the number of locations and the exact time and place only for the first location. Announcements regarding the other three locations were made successively, in between the appearances scheduled. Apart from the main organisers, people participating in the event had therefore to rely exclusively on practices based on trust and collaboration, as developed within online networks, in order to meet the requirements of the event. Instigators wanted to ensure on one hand the spontaneity of the performance, on the other hand to abide to flashmob rules[9]. The paradoxical result was that, on the day, the number of people joining the *ensemble* grew from one location to another as messages were forwarded to an increasing number of people, whilst the quality of the presentation and the sharpness of timing remained the same. The number of spectators joining appears to have been higher in public places where the risk of manifestation was higher, to the extent to which in one instance where the flashmobbers *occupied* Boulevard Magheru (one of the main avenues of Bucharest), the flashmob had the biggest number of spectators joining in, or filming, and the images

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filmed by passers-by went viral in less than 24 hours. In this instance though, the police interfered promptly, leading to problems that delayed the publication of the official video material of the flashmob with a few days. Nevertheless, the *life* of the flashmob continued performatively online for a few good weeks. Comments on various online channels tended to appreciate the *Michael Jackson Bucharest Tribute* as a performance of the highest professional/aesthetic quality and, indirectly, as a politically charged intervention in the public sphere – in the manner of the Occupy movements, avant-la-lettre. All in all, one can easily recognize throughout the process described above, that the stages of production, presentation/representation, and reception/dissemination of performance were in place, as in any performance creative process, yet adapted to the specific needs of such a novel type of performance, merging local live and digital means and practices, and securing the hybridized expression of the collective and the individual, in a creative manner that become visible within the public sphere, beyond national boundaries.

As the increasing number of blogs and sites dedicated to the practice of flashmobs shows[10], as well as the plethora of flashmobs taking place across the world as a response to events and issues considered (momentarily) relevant within the public sphere, prove that there is substantial potential for development inscribed in flashmobs as a novel mode of performance. Displaying a novel type of performativity and collective authorship, whilst proposing dramaturgies of experience that are quite diverse and open to participatory spectatorship in the most unexpected way, flashmobs seem able to reconnect art with life, and stimulate the imagination of creative communities, albeit in a fleeting, temporary, often playful manner. The attempt of corporate multinationals, or various creative business to use this mode of performance to service their own agendas (as in the case of the famous T-Mobile advert[11]) and, therefore, potentially compromise the *true* spirit of the flashmobs, is met with resistance by flashmobbers (as specialised websites discourse regularly shows), yet they come to prove even further the potential flashmobs hold as performance that stimulates the interest of contemporary spectators. In sum, as a novel mode of performance occurring in the 21st century, interdisciplinary in nature, and with definite emancipatory and participatory potential, flashmobs draw both on

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pre-existing models performance, in terms of making performance and dissemination, as well on digital and mobile media practices and as outlined before.

Attempts to historically track down and therefore legitimize flashmobs as performance practice with an emancipatory (and politically effective!) potential, have occurred in the past decade. Interestingly enough, the site *World Facts* tracks down as a forefather to the modern flashmobs a much older flashmob than the one held at Macy's, NY, in 2003, and publishes on the 9th of July 2006 the material entitled *Use of term 'flash mob'* that describes a performative occurrence dating way back to 1840s Tasmania, advancing the idea that flashmobs are not an entirely new phenomenon. The site maintains that the first use of the term *flashmob* was made in 1844, in connection to a spontaneous action of a group of 300-400 female convicts in a Tasmanian prison, in Van Diemen's Land, who turned at once and revealed their backsides to the authorities, performing a collective mooning as a sign of resistance and disapproval to the authorities (World Facts, 2006). The illustration the website provides in support of the theory belongs to modern Tasmanian artist Peter Gouldthrope's graphic attempt of recapture the historical moment. An interesting conversation in terms of the validity of the fact is listed under the comments, between art historian using the online name *xiaolongnu* – who claims that the image is not proof enough, since it is an obviously modern interpretation made in the style of the postcards of the time, and suggests more in depth research is needed into the diary of Reverend Robert Crooke, who apparently used the term flashmob for the first time, and a Tasmanian local who signs *meika loofs samorzewki* and lives one kilometre away from the former prison (a *Female Factory*) where the incident occurred, and who provides many interesting insights in support of the article published by World Facts. Apart from the anecdotal spiciness of this story, an obviously emerging need for validating flashmobs as a particular performative act in its own right is recognisable. Common denominators that can be tracked down across time are: apparent spontaneity, unruly collective and obviously performative behaviour, an ostentatious sense of humour and *lightness* in spite of the politically charged subject of the flashmob, and effectiveness of impact in terms of attracting attention, based on briefness and intensity of performative action.

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Nevertheless, when attempting to establish a genealogy of flashmobs and track down potential *forefathers* within the field of performance, I would suggest it would be more relevant to look at the collaborative performance practices of DADA movements (from 1916 through to 1920s), characterised by: a) the attempt to provide the spectators with a dramaturgy of experience rather than narration that aimed to reconnect every-day life with arts, politics, and the societal in terms of shared values; b) the particular sense of humour – incongruous, anarchic, absurdist at times, yet always playful and liberating, and not the least important; c) the attempt to subvert established performative conventions and clichés through interdisciplinary and/or multi-medial means, thus (potentially) leading to spectatorial awareness and emancipation in terms of perception.

Furthermore, American happenings of the early 1960s, defined as interdisciplinary and unmatrixed performative events with established potential towards participatory and emancipatory engagement in terms of spectatorship, come even closer to what flashmobs nowadays propose in terms of experience and impact. The blurring of the boundaries between spectating and performing through engaging spectators actively (and, at times, physically) in the act of performance, the expressed attempt to propose a radical (and anarchic, thus liberating) approach towards engaging with contemporary political, societal values, their inherent interdisciplinarity, are common conceptual and formal denominators between the two, with the corollary that performance itself is subject to the historical and the contingent, and therefore subject to cultural and environmental changes, notwithstanding medial developments. Happenings as performances – quite often inter- or multi-disciplinary required the active participation of the audience, where spontaneity and improvisation was quintessential. The celebration of intensity of presence – human presence that is – in both instances was and is relevant into tracking connections and similarities. Both happenings and flashmobs engage, by way of performative means and with tools adequate to their time, in an explicit relationship with their environment, underlining the seminal importance of the political, social, and artistic wider context in which they occur. Differences might reside in particular topics and performative or

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medial conventions used, but the approach was similar in ethos. Also, whilst happenings engaged with performance, fine art or theatre related conventions by subverting them, flashmobs tend to engage mainly with performance related conventions and topics of societal or political currency that pertain to popular culture and entertainment (i.e. widely known iconic conventions and clichés), attempting to re-purpose them in order to achieve their purpose, which bears similarity in intent with happenings.

In sum, as an emerging new mode of performance in the 21st century, flashmobs hold the promise for developing even further, providing a particularly engaging *meeting* place for performing and spectating, relying on the hybridization of medial and aesthetic conventions as well as cultural practices pertaining to a range of performing and online based media. They propose a platform for taking further technologies of trust and cooperation that leads to enhancing possibilities for creative collective authorship, in unprecedented ways.

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Notes

[1] See info: Flash Mob (2013a, 2013b); Flash Mob (2013a); Flash Mob (2013b); Use of The Term Flash Mob (2013); Cheesebikini Blog (2013); Flashmob Italia (2013); Flashmob Romania (2013); Flashmob UK (2013); Flashmob (2013); Improv Everywhere (2013); Michael Jackson Tribute Bucharest (2013); Michael Jackson Tribute Flash Mob (2013); Michael Jackson Tribute Stockholm (2013); Occupy Taksim/Stockholm Flashmob (2013); Official Michael Jackson Tribute Seattle Flash Mob (2013); Satanslaundromat (2013); The T-Mobile Dance (2013).

[2] For a list of resourcese, see the references.

[3] Online accounts name *Harper's Magazine* sènior editor Bill Wasik as the secret inventor of the modern flashmob. Wasik confirms himself as the *instigator* of the first modern flashmob, one year after the mob craze started, and provides a detailed account and analysis of flashmobs' occurence as a particular cultural phenomenon: characterizied by Luddism, related to *deindividuation*, demonstrating the abilities of mobile and online based tecnologies to enhance cooperation, and constituting itself as a metaphor of hipsters' culture, especially within American culture (Wasik, 2006).

[4] For more details, see: <http://www.cheesebikini.com/category/flash-mobs/page/1 and 3.

[5] For more details related to the original entry, see Savage's comments on the *cheesebikini?* blog. Available at: <http://www.cheesebikini.com/2004/07/09/flash-mob-in-the-oxford-english-dictionary/#more-132>.

[6] For more details, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_mob>. Accessed on: 10 aug. 2013.

[7] Wikipedia draws on Howard Rheingold' s theory of the smart mobs, that makes the difference between flashmobs, which Rheingold defines as "self organised entertainment", focused on pranks, and "smart mobs", as public actions more clearly focused towards political or social issues. For more details, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashmobs>.

[8] See *Occupy Taksim / Stockholm Flashmob* on YouTube. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L50_PCtbedI>.

[9] Flashmob rules circulated online in the past decade in many guises. A more recent and comprehensive Romanian version that abides by the rules of the flashmob in discussion was published on the site *Flashmob Romania* on 21st January, 2012. Available at: <http://www.flashmob-romania.ro/?p=371>.

[10] See selected list in the references section for more details.

[11] *The T-Mobile Dance* flashmob took place at Liverpool train station in London at 11h on 15th of January 2009. For more details, see reference.

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