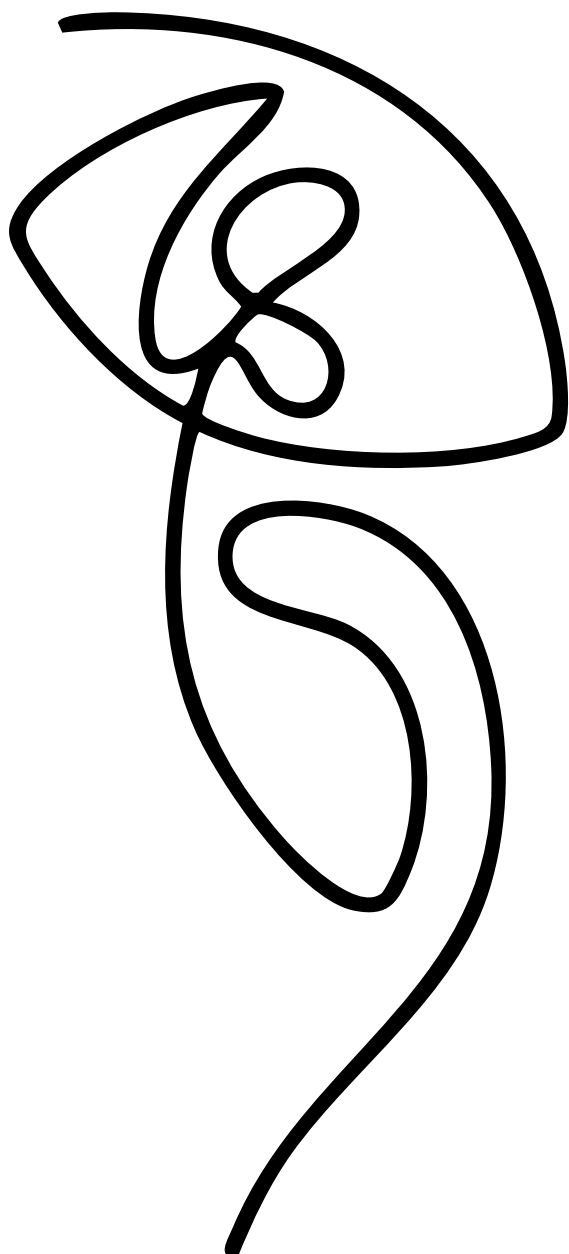


AIRDanza

journal

Fonti
Teorie
Didattica
Scena



N. 1, 2024
ISSN - 3035 - 3289

AIRDanza

Associazione Italiana per la Ricerca sulla Danza

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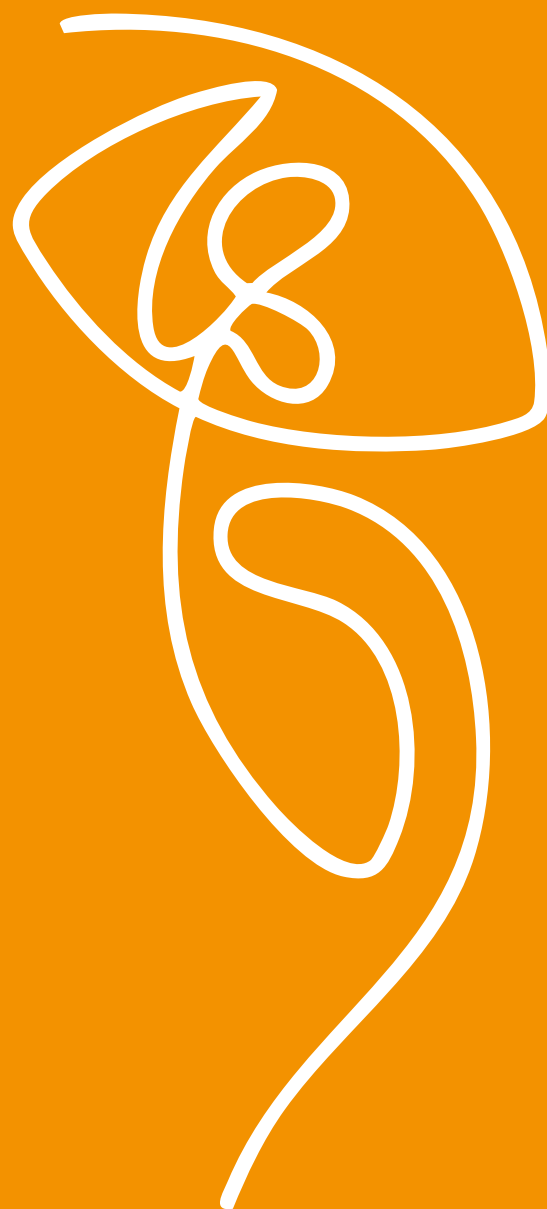
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Discorsi e Ricerche Artistiche



MARIA ELENA RICCI

Project Tool: Rehearsing the Revolution

Abstract

In this essay, I dive into Onye Ozuzu's *Project Tool*, investigating the relationship between this contemporary performance and carpentry project, Black Feminism and capitalism. Utilizing Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism as the theoretical basis for the research, it is shown how *Project Tool* is an anti-capitalist work informed by a strong Black Feminist approach to processes of creation and production. The production of wood dance floors by Ozuzu's all-female collective is viewed as a democratic, collaborative and thus Black Feminist process, the explicit performance of *labour-time* and *labour-power* during the performance as an act aimed at dismantling both our fetishist relationship to commodity consumption and any patriarchal assumption separating women and labour, and the audience's active engagement as subversive to conventionally capitalist modes of art consumption.

In questo articolo viene analizzato *Project Tool* di Onye Ozuzu, esplorando la relazione tra questa performance contemporanea e progetto di falegnameria, il Feminismo Nero ed il capitalismo. Utilizzando l'analisi sul capitalismo di Karl Marx come base teorica per la ricerca, si afferma che *Project Tool* è un'opera anti-capitalista influenzata da una forte connessione al Feminismo Nero per quanto riguarda i processi di creazione e produzione. La creazione dei pavimenti in legno, ad opera del collettivo femminile di Ozuzu, è visto come un processo democratico, collaborativo e quindi Femminista Nero, l'esplicita performance di *labour-time* e *labour-power* come un atto finalizzato a smantellare sia il nostro rapporto feticista con il consumo, che qualsiasi stereotipo patriarcale che separi le donne dal lavoro, e il coinvolgimento attivo del pubblico nella performance come sovversivo rispetto ai tipici modi capitalisti di fruizione dell'arte.

Maria Elena Ricci¹

Project Tool: Rehearsing the Revolution

Onye Ozuzu is a dance administrator, choreographer, researcher and performing artist. An active member of Chicago's dance community since 1997, she first served as Dean of Columbia College Chicago's Dance Department and currently serves as Dean of the University of Florida College of the Arts. Rooted in non-Western movement practices, her work has been presented and acclaimed in the United States and abroad.

In this essay, I will dive into one of Onye Ozuzu's most current works, *Project Tool*, looking into the relationship between this work of contemporary performance, Black Feminism and capitalism. Utilizing Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism as the theoretical basis for my research, I assert that *Project Tool* is an anti-capitalist work of contemporary performance informed by a strong Black Feminist approach to processes of creation and production. *Project Tool* resulted in two final products: first, the production of a series of wood dance floors to be offered to the Chicago dance community for their use and, second, the performance which centers around the act of building the floor and evolves into «improvisation, projected images, original sound compositions, spoken dialogue, and text».² In order to pursue this line of thinking, I have considered both the processes that led to the construction of a series of dance floors, as well as the performance, specifically the 2018 performance at the Chicago Cultural Center, displayed at length on the *Project Tool* website.³

Although not intentionally created to be read as anti-capitalist or Black Feminist, *Project Tool* displays crucial tenets of Black Feminism, including the foundational anti-capitalist, socialist and revolutionary nature of the movement. Because of their shared critique of capitalism, the frameworks of Black Feminism and a Marxist analysis of capitalism used here, are inevitably intertwined at their base. This will be demonstrated by looking both at *Project Tool's* form, the organizing structure through which the performance was delivered and consumed, and the content, the language of the bodies moving in space as well as the production of the series of wood dance floors. Specifically, I will explore the production of the wood dance floors as a democratic, collaborative and thus Black Feminist process, the explicit performance of labor-time and labor-power as an act aimed at dismantling both our fetishist relationship to commodity consumption and any patriarchal assumption separating women and labor, and the audience's active engagement in the performance as subversive to conventionally capitalist modes of art consumption.

Taking Marx's belief that a product must be analyzed according to its corresponding

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2. Onye Ozuzu. *About Project Tool*. «Project Tool», projecttoolarchive.weebly.com/about-project-tool.html.

3. Onye Ozuzu. *Chicago Cultural Center*. «Project Tool», projecttoolarchive.weebly.com/cultural-center.html.

historical context and mode of production into account, I will examine *Project Tool* through the lens of our mature capitalist era and establish the multiple ways in which Ozuzu and her ensemble made it possible, in our late capitalist society, to create work that not only exists outside of the current mode of mass production, but also opposes it, finally resulting in a radical, revolutionary performance.

Wood Dance Floors: Body and Tool

At the heart of *Project Tool*, there is the concept of the tool. Coming from a long line of farmers and carpenters from Ohio to Nigeria, Ozuzu was interested in reclaiming the hereditary relationship between the body and the tool used for labor, specifically, the somatic movement that emerges from the body at work with the tool. Already in 2013, when Ozuzu was the artist-in-residence at Chulitna Lodge in Alaska, she was looking into how different cultures around the world engaged in dances that resembled the mechanism of the body at work, finding a connection between the way people danced and the tools employed by their ancestors. In line with this, and with the minimal carpentry knowledge and skills she had inherited through her family, Ozuzu was able to produce a collection of modular sprung wood dance floors in collaboration with her exclusively female-presenting artist collective, composed of dancers Jessica Marasa, Anna Martine Whitehead, Keyierra Collins and Keisha Bennett. Yet, this was not the first time Ozuzu had thought about building floors. In 2009 she took a trip to Dominica, an island in the Caribbean characterized by its upward, mountainous land. Deeply inspired by the natural beauty of the island's landscape and imagining herself living there permanently, Ozuzu soon realized the rockiness and unlevelled surface of the land represented a real challenge to her Westernized dance practice, her ability to lay down and roll on the floor in particular. This is when she started thinking about how a movable series of sprung floors would facilitate dancing on the island. Much of Ozuzu's pondering over going back to a tool, connecting to her embodied, ancestral knowledge and being able to build and produce something for herself strongly relates to a self-made, rudimentary and pre-capitalist era of production. Growing up between the 1970s and 1980s, Ozuzu was taught many handcrafting jobs such as sewing, baking bread, replacing car oil, climbing a tree, building furniture and picking blueberries, somatic abilities which she soon understood were being lost due to the digital realm taking over our lives and the replacement of our bodies as the technological device for human advancement. With our very existence gravitating more and more towards comfort, ready-made, fast and easy production and results, where is the body left? Ozuzu expresses concerns which you may otherwise only hear from dancers, meditation practitioners, body-mind centering therapists, athletes, doctors, people who encounter the pressing issue of capitalist societies' disembodiment from a multitude of different angles.⁴ By simply observing our current modes of living, one might notice that physicality, fatigue and presence are actually being replaced by electric cars, robots, ready-made meals and artificial intelligence. The body is slowly being erased and, with it, its long-term capabilities and every-day training, its know-how. It is therefore no surprise that artists search for inspiration and peace in natural, rudimentary settings, as Ozuzu says, «at the edge of

4. Read about disembodiment Banu Bargu, *Disembodiment: Corporeal Politics of Radical Refusal*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, or Freya Carkeek and Paul James *This Abstract Body*, «Arena», n. 99/100, 1992.

civilization», where comfort is not easily found.⁵ In such contexts, you must attend to your tasks with your full self, in order to fulfill your immediate needs. You must do, not with a phone, Alexa or Siri, but with your body. In Ozuzu's case, movable wood floors is what she needed, and it was a somewhat natural choice to build them herself. By making such choice, the artist also sought to align spiritually to what she defined as the «eternal evolution of life forces».⁶ What is important about *Project Tool*, apart from the performance or project itself, is, in fact, the values which sit at the very base of its conception and are promoted throughout the artistic process, and reflected in its careful documentation and archival efforts.

With this set of previous experiences, by creating *Project Tool*, Ozuzu envisioned an equitable, collaborative system in which artists would work together, taking turns, to build dance floors serving artists in the Chicagoland area who needed good-quality dance floors to dance on. Those who are not a dance practitioners may think the floor is a simple resource one can just assume is there, taken for granted. As any dancer and performer can confirm, it is not. Dancers and performers are often forced to move on unstable and unlevel floors that are made of neither wood nor marble, ignoring the physical damage this can cause, particularly to the back and knees. Offering well-made movable dance floors then becomes an act of solidarity towards dancers who, like any other workers, require resources for their instrument, the body, and their art to be produced and delivered in safety. Today, the floors are archived at the Rebuild Foundation in Hyde Park, Chicago, where artists can go to borrow them. In the city, they are currently used at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Red Clay Dance Company, Sweet Water Foundation and Outerspace Studios. The floors are also in New Orleans, at Dancing Grounds, as well as in Cap Haïtien, Haiti, at Haitdansco.

Wood Dance Floors: A Radically Democratic & Feminist Production

Initially bringing in a male professional carpenter to teach and guide the ensemble to build the wood floors, Ozuzu later decided they would figure it out on their own. In a discussion with her, moderated by Dr. Raquel L. Monroe, Ozuzu said it wasn't through any fault of his. Nonetheless, she wanted her group to be taken seriously despite preconceived notions around their gender and the physicality of the work they were doing. Ozuzu stated:

This is one of the sweetest, most humble people you'll ever want to meet. Yet, (...) I felt like I was observing him in the space as a white male. With my group of mostly black young female presenting practitioners [it] was a diminishment of self. A dancer would hold a tool, feel insecure about it and I could, I could see it in the bodies this like shrinking away.⁷

Here, Ozuzu describes the power struggle between gender and tool, with woodworking typically being identified as a man's job. Ozuzu felt as if the carpenter was exercising

5. Onye Ozuzu. *Project Tool Interview: Onye Ozuzu*. «Project Tool», 00:11:20, projecttoolarchive.weebly.com/about-project-tool.html.

6. Onye Ozuzu. *Project Tool Interview: Onye Ozuzu*. «Project Tool», 00:05:25, projecttoolarchive.weebly.com/about-project-tool.html.

7. Onye Ozuzu. Class discussion. 21 Oct. 2020, Zoom, Columbia College Chicago. This discussion took place as part of the Black Feminist Choreographic Praxis course I was enrolled in as an undergraduate student at Columbia College Chicago. The interview was neither registered or transcribed.

his white man privilege in order to get the job done, often taking tools like hammers out of the women's hands. As a Black Feminist would, Ozuzu refused the male leadership and, instead of going down the easy route, having a teacher telling the group exactly what to do, she based the group's practice on the spirit of teamwork and personal commitment. In an article by Jan-Henry Gray, performer Jessica Marasa stated: «There's [...] such a spirit of collectivity between all of the dancers and the material we're working with».⁸ The collective effort and structure without leadership evokes the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a small group of Black lesbian women that in 1974 united to politically organize and intellectually articulate what Black Feminism was to them, establishing their radical politics and lack of central leadership. In their political statement, the CRC state: «We believe in collective process and nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society».⁹ In the organization of her work, the building of the wood dance floors in particular, Ozuzu employed the same Black Feminist perspective outlined by the CRC political statement.

Wood Dance Floors: An Anti-Capitalist Production

Ozuzu's work can also be viewed in relation to Angela Y. Davis' essay «Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation».¹⁰ Davis uses the works of Karl Marx in order to «specify the ways in which the subjugation of women and their ideological relegation to the sphere of nature were indissolubly wedded to the consolidation of capitalism».¹¹ In pre-civilized eras, men's responsibilities related directly to the human necessity of eating (e.g., hunting). These activities provided the basis for the construction of the male figure as the one dominating over nature:

They have deciphered its mysteries, subdued its forces, and have forged their self-definition in contradistinction to the nature they have conquered. But women are projected as embodiments of nature's unrelenting powers. In their alienated portrait, women are still primarily undifferentiated beings - sexual, childbearing, natural.¹²

Relegated to the sphere of nature, women contributed to social production from their households. This sexual division of labour in pre-capitalist society became the condition for the continued oppression of women once capitalism broke into history. Economically speaking, capitalism brought a shift from the production of use-value to that of exchange-value. «Thus, with respect to production, women experienced a double inferiority. They are first prohibited (...) from consistently and equally reaching the point of production. Secondly, the labour they continue to monopolize does not measure up to the characteristic labor of capitalist society».¹³ Here, Davis explains that the consistent oppression of women negates them the possibility to reach the level of production and that the type of production

8. Jan-Henry Gray. *A Dancer and Her Tools: Onye Ozuzu's "Project Tool"*. «ColumbiaCollegeChicago», 6 Feb. 2018, www.colum.edu/news-and-events/articles/2018/a-dancer-and-her-tools-onye-ozuzus-project-tool#.X9CYYy2ZMdV.

9. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. *How We Get Free*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017, p. 27.

10. Angela Yvonne Davis *Women & Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation*, edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *The Black Feminist Reader*, Hoboken - New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2000, pp. 146-182.

11. Angela Yvonne Davis, op.cit, p. 148.

12. Angela Yvonne Davis, op.cit, p. 148.

13. Angela Yvonne Davis, op.cit, p. 163.

they are actually in charge of continues to be use-value, rather than exchange-value, which is what our capitalist society envisions laborers to mass produce. The revolutionary and singularity aspect of Ozuzu's idea lies in the fact that the system she put in place completely dismisses the capitalist emphasis on exchange-value as critiqued by Karl Marx, for whom a product acquires value only when it can be sold. While the idea behind the production of the dance floors is based on exchange among dancers and artists, there is no monetary exchange. Ozuzu continues to privilege the floors's use-value, value resting in the wood as a strong, supportive material for its intended use. Ozuzu wanted to give artists the independence of being able to produce something in a society that often discredits them for not contributing to mass consumption and the country's economic wealth. In fact, Ozuzu also acknowledges the floor building as a radical act in today's capitalist society: «It also offers my collaborators and me, in this time of insecurity regarding the future of the arts, an opportunity to claim our right to be artists who contribute to society through our work».¹⁴

The Performance: (De-)Commodification of Body, Tool and Floor

It's January 2018 at the Chicago Cultural Center. The performance begins and the dancers disperse in the complex labyrinthine structure of the space while audience members go wondering about. There is no fixed start, but the dancers are already gathered on the hexagonal-shaped, sprung wood dance platform on which they move. The bell-like music played live by sound artist Damon Locks gives a dreamy and ritualistic atmosphere to the dancers' movement. At first, each of them moves independently, with internal focus and grounded weight. Then, they all start doing the same movement: with their elbows held fixed to the side of their torso, forearms and hands parallel to the floor, the five dancers engage in a slow, side to side motion. Absorbed in the repetitiveness of their bodies, they continue performing the movement, each at their personal tempo, some of which is captivatingly slow. One by one, the performers leave the dance platform and, as sometimes happens in itinerary performances like this, audience members look undecided as to whether to follow them or stay and witness the movement come to its conclusion. Those who do watch, see Ozuzu bring the movement lower and lower, until she is on her knees and her hands are cautiously sweeping the floor, side by side. This conclusive moment resembles an act of honoring the floor that supports the dancer's body and movement, the same floor the dancers themselves have built. As the performance unfolds and the dancers return to this repetitive movement pattern, it becomes clear that they are embodying the mechanism of the tools themselves, or the repetitive movement of the body at work. In this way, the body becomes the tool itself. In a movement pattern that has the same weight and pendular motion, their fists are placed on their chests, their elbows are fixed out in space on the right and left side, and their heads and torsos are dropped towards the floor and swing side by side. Another moment in which it becomes apparent that the dancers embody the tool is during Jessica Marasa's brief solo. While the rest of the dancers circle around her to create a cypher setting and make background noise with undefined verbal sounds, Ozuzu mechanically speaks to the movement she performs: «I wield a tool

14. Onye Ozuzu. *About Project Tool*. «Project Tool», projecttoolarchive.weebly.com/about-project-tool.html.

in my hand. I... wield a tool in my hand. I wield a tool in my hand. It has a handle, it has a blade, it has a weight, it has a weight, it has a blade, it has a handle, it has a weight».¹⁵

The next thing we know, most of the dancers are reunited around a table on which a number of wooden beams and woodworking equipment have been placed. Anna Martine Whitehead, Keyierra Collins and Keisha Bennett start working on the building of the floor. They connect long metal instruments perpendicularly to the end of the wooden beams. Screwdrivers help them secure the instrument to the beams. After a few minutes, Ozuzu arrives to the table and involves one of the audience members in order to help her do the physical work of holding, lifting and aligning the heavy wooden beams, guiding her with natural and uncontrived verbal communication. In this brief yet decisive moment, the audience and the performers become one productive system of cooperation, collaborating through physical labor and verbal input for the construction of a product. Not only was it important for Ozuzu to make the audience feel what it is like to do the labour and engage with the tools, but the performance is labor itself: even when not actively building the floor, the dancers embody the work of the tool or emulate the body's movement at work. Thus, the performance of labor-power and labor-time is key: building a wood dance floor is neither quick nor easy, and the performers showcase both the physical effort and the time it requires. In «The Commodity», a chapter from the great work *Capital*, Karl Marx states:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. (...) The mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value.¹⁶

In this section, titled *The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secrets*, Marx describes how a product becomes a commodity as soon as it enters the market, in which a process of continuous exchange enables the consumer to completely forget about the labor and the laborer behind the product. With the labor becoming 'hidden' or 'mysterious' to us, Marx believes we create a fetishist relationship with commodity, as if it was «an inanimate object worshipped on account of its supposed magical powers».¹⁷ By centering the performance on the relation between the body and the tool used to carry out the production, Ozuzu strategically de-commodifies the wood dance floor, promoting its presence in the work, rather than its disappearance from the eyes of the consumers. Here, the labor behind the product is unambiguously explicit in the face of the audience members.

The Performance: Anti-Capitalist Consumption

Having outlined the multiple ways in which the production of the wood dance floors is anti-capitalist and a radically Black Feminist process, I will now explore the subversive aspect of the performance provides an example of an anti-capitalist way of delivering and consuming art. As mentioned above, the *Project Tool* performance at the Chicago Cultural

15. [Full] *Project Tool Performance at Chicago Cultural Center [2018]*. «YouTube», uploaded by Jovan Landry, 27 June 2019, (00:51:45-00:53:00), www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcEgOxa1SXS&feature=emb_title.

16. Karl Marx, *Capital*, translated by Ben Fowkes, vol. 1, London, Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 163-164.

17. Pieter Lawrence. *The Fetishism of Money*. «Marxist Internet Archive», www.marxists.org/archive/lawrence/2006/11/money_fetishism.htm.

Center is itinerary. Audience members are not given the conventional frontal stage setting and passively entertained. Rather, throughout the performance they are forced to move, adjust their positions through the space and actively follow the performers. Soon enough, audience members realize their inability to witness the five dancers' movement all at once. For the entire duration of the 90-minute performance, they are constantly required to make decisions about where they will place themselves in space. Tired of standing, by the second half of the performance, we see many audience members taking a seat on the ground and resting. The notion of art as a mere commodity to be consumed is also refused by the performers' temporary closeness to the audience members, as well as the one audience member's participation in the building of the wood floor with Onye Ozuzu. When going to see a performance, nobody would ever imagine it could be so much work! Well, that is the point. Ozuzu refuses the idea of her work simply being consumed. The physical responsiveness required of the audience members translates to an intellectual responsiveness. With *Project Tool*, it is quite impossible to get lost in the act of contemplation, because the audience's engagement is not only required for the performance development, but it is also crucial to the act of consumption itself. Those who witness the *Project Tool* performance inevitably leave more enriched, more inspired and, especially, more curious. When digging into the story behind *Project Tool*, its focus on the body at work, the act of solidarity that the wooden dance floors represent, and the modes of production and consumption it employs, one can't help but recognize its foundational anti-capitalist nature.

Nowadays, artists struggle through economic insecurity, having to rely on grants and side-jobs to sustain their livelihood and fund their creative practices. Even when presenting their work at respected artistic and cultural venues, artists' work is not fairly retributed, often not covering the hours and hours of rehearsals spent for the creation of the final product. In a society that values product over process, the artist's financial stability is constantly at stake. Marx believed that once becoming conscious of their exploitation, workers would lead a revolution to end capitalism. However, his theory did not include a particular analysis of the economic nor discriminatory situation faced by artists or Black women. In addition to the challenges posed by capitalism on the artistic fields, Black female artists continue to work through intersectional discrimination, still making their way through highly patriarchal and racist dynamics. It is because of such intersectionality that I want to invoke the Combahee River Collective's political statement once again:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed people necessitates the destruction of the political-economic system of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialist because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. (...) We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. (...) Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.¹⁸

Well aware of the exploitation of artists in today's consumerist economy, Ozuzu created a radical performance that resists all current modes of capitalist production and

18. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *How We Get Free*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 19-20.

consumption. She first departed from her interest in the body in relationship to the tool, finding an ancestral connection through her own lineage. Then, thanks to her trip to Dominica, she understood the necessity for movement practitioners all over the world to be able to move on stable and safe floors, recognizing the Black Feminist assumption that in any kind of struggle, you must start from those at the bottom, those who suffer the most from the issue in question. With her ensemble, she put in place a system based on supportive, liable and honest exchange amongst artists, in spite of the capitalist lesson that everything has a price. They maintained the same kind of approach in the rehearsal space, where each member of the ensemble had responsibility for the construction of the wooden dance floors. Equal power distribution thus became imperative once Ozuzu realized the ineffectiveness of a central leadership, who happened to be a white male. The all-female artists figured it out on their own terms, finally producing a series of sprung wood dance floors that are currently available for those artists and performers who need them. The performance of labor in all of its facets, from the practical act of building to the stylized dancing, breaks the fetishist relationship to commodity as well as overturning the stereotypical assumption that woodworking is a male-exclusive job. The audience's active participation in the performance provides for another layer of anti-capitalism. *Project Tool* is not a work of art to be passively consumed, but one that audiences must engage with both physically and intellectually.

Because of *Project Tool*'s strong Black Feminist and anti-capitalist nature, I believe that creative artists like Onye Ozuzu have the potential to lead the intellectual and political revolution the Combahee River Collective calls to. All artists and workers must unite to finally end the pervasive systems that systematically oppress Black women. As Ozuzu so sophisticatedly exemplifies through her work *Project Tool*, in order for everyone to be free, capitalism must be eradicated from all of our personal and collective practices. This accounts for an absolutely revolutionary act in the late stages of our capitalist society. By ending capitalism in name of a more equitable and non-profit centered world, other systems of oppressions such as racism, patriarchy and homophobia will also become weaker and weaker. Black Feminism has been articulating the necessity for this to happen since the 1970s and now, more than ever, whether it is with our art or everyday life choices, we must join the fight.



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