I watched a recent video work by Katarina Zdjelar. I encountered a woman singing with a voice so pure and beautiful that I was magnetically attracted to the sound. She was a young woman with a pretty face and she held my gaze directly, barely blinking, as if not to lose our connection. Strangely, as she sang, she constantly changed tunes. Like a record needle that skips a groove, her song continued seamlessly in another place, yet it caused a slight disturbance to my body each time. The woman herself appeared rather untouched by these abrupt transitions. While her efforts were sometimes visibly strained at the point of transition, she settled into each new musical interlude as if nothing had happened. Her voice shifted back and forth between several compositions, ranging from opera to pop, from one language to another, from singing to speaking; the high pitches resounding until I could feel my own body resonating with her sound.

This work, *AAA (Mein Herz)* (2016), bore an uncanny resemblance to a series of dreams I once had, in which I would break into song, holding high operatic pitches until the last inner reverberation to die out before moving on.

Toward an autonomy of self, Lucy Cotter
withdraws into herself. It is barely noticeable, but it’s there, this retreat into an inner space, a small departure from the demands of presence. I read it as a passing sign or a silent acknowledgment that one cannot be both hyper-productive and truly open; openness requiring a level of vulnerability that one cannot afford. There is a wistful sadness in *AAA (Mein Herz)*; a glistening in the singer’s eyes that might, if allowed, well up into a tear. If a sob deep in oneself might be allowed to rise freely. If one could risk loss of face.

This is where *AAA (Mein Herz)* poises us, somewhere between our Selves and a self that is not an “I”, but retreating from everything the “I” is expected to deliver in these times: assured self-confidence, hyper-productivity and high-end efficiency. A refusal of the internal management of Self as human capital, that ostensibly unalienated form of labour in which one must constantly invest, speculating on the potential appreciation of one’s investment. Pressed to govern ourselves in this way through neoliberal labour conditions, how do we gain the agency or autonomy required to conduct and appreciate our lives differently?

While the singer in *AAA (Mein Herz)*, an artist in her own right, embodies a certain expressive freedom, there is a tension in the work that suggests she nevertheless inhabits the cusp of autonomy and servility. To sing is a release, an opening up. Seeing her in this act, we might assume her creativity, her self-expression, and ultimately her freedom. Yet the conditions for her artistic production have quietly been made unrecognizable. Demands have been heightened to the edge of human ability. And so she must sing, not only one genre but several; she must speak not only one language but many; not only sing but use her speaking voice, not only hold our gaze but take no break from this unnatural level of connection. The conditions have in effect become inhuman, but she continues to perform as if nothing has happened.
the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple or sextuple opening that a ‘self’ can take place [...], the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion."

And so, while appearing to be a rebellion of one, AAA (Mein Herz) gives way to the possibility of a collective politics, a new basis for solidarity. Being beside oneself, pursued by one’s own heart, one flows from oneself and this lack of hardness, this elasticity forges a new breed of connectivity.

Community of the Heart

This is the connectivity we find manifest in Zdjelar’s subsequent work, the four-channel video installation Not A Pillar Not A Pile (Tanz für Dore Hoyer) (2017). Watching, we are immersed in close examination of the entwinement of dancers, who navigate the potential and resistance of each other’s bodies in collective movement. Their identities evade us. Instead the close camera work plunges into the reality of their body-worlds. The looped documentary video of the installation opens with one limb encircling another in the lower corner of the screen—a folded Z of bodies is pleated along creases of skin. Shifting to a horizontal plane, we follow two connected arms, which engage the potential and resistance of each other’s bodies in close examination of the entwinement of dancers. The work is an invitation to ‘take a crazy chance’. To cease to be subordinated to other powers—including and perhaps especially the Self—that enchain being with the intentions of efficiency. We glimpse the possibility of an inner rebellion. An inner aliveness that prompts a realignment of one’s efforts with the wish to burn for nothing, for no utility or outcome, without speculation. Herein the self-canceling logic of our lives unfolds. As Nancy describes it, ‘There is no way of speaking a message from experience. A “letter” is not a message: it is agrammatic, a phantastic element that remains silent. It can be spoken only in order to be unspoken.’ Hence the work’s title “Mein Herz!” (my heart). The work constitutes an invitation to exceed the register of the sonorous. It is a different pressurization of piercing, a different experience of piercing, an experience of piercing itself as a kind of sound-space opened by sound, by which an access to self-renewal becomes possible. In these terms, the work is a spatially opened by sound, by which an access to self-renewal becomes possible.

Pressed to undertake the most monumental form of sound-space opened by sound, by which an access to self-renewal becomes possible, a work is coerced into a form of expression that forces her to maximize and strain every inner resource she possesses, from her breathing to her energy resources, the woman subordinates herself to producing a successful outcome. Yet, in her agreement to perform so efficiently, so high-productively, she robs herself of the space for deviation or failure that constitutes her creativity and ultimately her inner freedom. We may notice from her momentary ocular retreats that she cannot in fact give all, even as she appears to be managing to do so. Hence the slippage into android functioning, which is convincingly human but not humane. But this work by Zdjelar holds a promise in its lyrics—the anticipation of a message from elsewhere. A “letter” that might throw the storyline of Self off course. Herein the work signals the possibility of joy—a rebellion of the heart. Hence the work’s title “Mein Herz!” (my heart). The work constitutes an invitation to exceed the register of the sonorous. It is a different pressurization of piercing, a different experience of piercing, an experience of piercing itself as a kind of sound-space opened by sound, by which an access to self-renewal becomes possible. In these terms, the work is a spatially opened by sound, by which an access to self-renewal becomes possible.
Thus built on the foundations of tensions underlying proximity. This is palpable for example in a moment where two arms are turning in space, trying to maintain contact through the points of two fingertips. There is no guarantee that this contiguity can be maintained or that difference will produce anything other than difference. Yet there is a sense that the unknowability of the images might lead to other processes of coming to know. While in this instance we see a loving exchange of bodies, we have learned to recognize the distancing it opens up. While the formal arrangement of isolated body parts might evoke a certain interchangeability of human experience, attention to details such as finger tattoos, birthmarks and flecks means that the commonality of bodies is presented in extension with "the most comprehensive and tightly-knit individuality". In this way we come close to a condition so eloquently described by Jean-Luc Nancy as a "singular-plural"; a condition in which there is contiguity—a point of contact—but not continuity. "There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme close physical interdependence of the bodies in Not A Pillar Not A Pile extends the state of bodily opening generated by listening in AAA (Mein Herz). Zdjelar's proposed "we" exists at this locus of an opening formed by listening to the interior of a body; an opening that forms a fault line rather than a given (social) architecture—"not a pillar, not a pile". As Jean-Luc Nancy remarks of the listening process, "We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture."
We are invited to study the face of this woman, whose eyes are closed in concentration and whose difficulty in holding the pose is not hidden from us. We study her hair, heaped in an off-centre ponytail and the elfin outline of her exposed ear. We notice the tiny bumps of pimples under the surface of her forehead. We are allowed to apprehend her presence like a sensitive lover, whose caress comes to appreciate every imperfection. Rather than being present, the woman is a “presence” in the sense of being unknowable. It is as if she might open her mouth at any moment and a voice would emerge that would be truly unrecognizable. As if Zdjelar, in this silent wordless work, has been looking for a different voice, “another sound” to communicate another sense than the one that can be spoken.

We will recall the artistic act portrayed in *AAA (Mein Herz)* as an act of labour, caught in the bind of contemporary conditions for production. Yet it is still a labour of love. Herein lies also the potential rebellion—a burning for nothing—that has historically been the sine qua non of art. If, as Marx once suggested, the society of alienated man is the caricature of his real community, Zdjelar’s *Not A Pillar Not A Pile* places its hopes on the possibility of truly unalienated labour, and by extension real community. If, as Michel Feher has argued in “Self Appreciation or the Aspirations of Human Capital”, the work of production education exceeds the production of individuals, we can say that Zdjelar’s work in its potentiality offers a utopian model for education in the arts. The film echoes the sexual act in its alternation of postures between two or more bodies, with tender caresses giving way to the taut stretching of limbs and the precariousness of untenable stances. We see bodies in the act of finding unexpected new positions by which to maintain embrace, making it a deeply human work. Yet its abstracted visual vocabulary also de-naturalizes any easy sense of “human meaning” appearing in the collective action. Though remaining figurative, the formal abstraction of the bodies suggests that we are operating on the understanding that what it means to be human is a complex and differentiated question. The work prompts reflection on gender and sexuality with images of full-length bodies withheld and the orientation of specific intimacies never specified. Although background knowledge and some close-ups would suggest collective forms, the diversity of energies and the complex and cross-cutting relations they imply is entirely open-ended in its scope. Race too is caught up in this constellation, thrown into attention through the juxtapositions of limbs of divergent skin tones, echoed in the flesh tones of the minimalist dance costumes. As viewers not having access to full body images and thus to “identities”, the skin of bodies becomes a surface knowledge that some do not possess. The film’s skin tone palette is not predicated on high contrasts or subtle differences, asserting the individuality of each skin tone.

Rather than relying on high contrasts for effect, we learn to study a gradated palette of skin tones in the subtlety of its middle ranges, effectively destabilizing the construct of race as such. We are sensitized to skin not as “the other” or as “the same” but to the relationship in self, so to speak, as it forms a “self”...
"Ah! Where, where next? Your heart banishes you from yourself, your heart pursues you, and you are already almost beside yourself, and you can't stand it any longer. … You flow from yourself, and your lack of hardness or elasticity means nothing any more."


Nancy recalls how, as a child, Stravinsky would listen to a mute peasant who produced unusual sounds with his arms. Nancy observes that he "was looking for a different voice, one more of less vocal than the one that is spoken, looking for a different voice, one more of less vocal than the one that is spoken, one more of less vocal than the one that is spoken." *Listening*, p. 7.