



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## THE FADING OF AN ARCHIMEDEAN POINT: STAGE AND AUDIENCE RECONSIDERED

MARITA TATARI HMDK STUTTGART

A feeling of urgency, doubled by and struggling with the feeling of powerlessness over the current techno-economic domination of the world, innervates and moves not only the contemporary performance scene, but the whole art scene. This urgency is simultaneously impelled to take into account the fact that received categories of forming, inhabiting and understanding the western-globalized world do not seem able to apply: “politics,” “art,” and “action” have alike lost the ground upon which they manifested, functioned, and received their meaning. The revival of interest in theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault within the framework of new materialisms, postcolonial critics and techno- or affect-ecologies is an attempt to respond to these transformations and find a language to address them. If it is indeed currently of particular relevance to the performing arts, this attempt, as well as the feeling of powerlessness, should be discussed with regard to the shift of the whole modern subject-based understanding of the world.

The editors of this issue define power “as a process of transforming relations of desire and potential into relations of dominance and possibility,” and powerlessness as “the seeming impossibility of renegotiating this process.” The renegotiation of power would suspend the transformation of relations of desire into relations of power and would possibly allow for relations of desire to take place as such. However, one could argue that the renegotiation of power-process is not identical to relations of desire and potential.

Michel Foucault, longing to overturn negative conceptions of power, sees “the pleasure that comes from exercising a power” and “the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power” circling around each other, inciting each other, converting the negative instance of obstacle in a spiral

(Foucault 1978, 45 and 157). However, from a philosophical and a psychoanalytical point of view, this spiral presents what Hegel called a “bad infinite”: by stepping infinitely further, liquidating the obstacle each time, it is a never-reached limit, a perpetual deferral. Psychoanalytically speaking, the experience of limit in desire is clearly distinguished from such a “bad infinite,” from a perpetual deferral (Copjec 1994 and 2015).<sup>1</sup> According to this distinction, desire is rather qualified—again in Hegelian terms—by a “good infinite,” which means an infinite which is in the limit, a reached limit, and thus a kind of finite infinite. I will argue that the distinction between renegotiation of power and desire is crucial in order to understand the shift we are currently facing, the shift being undergone by the subject-based understanding of the world. I will consider this distinction in a broader theoretical context, and, drawing on it, I will transfer it into the field of performing arts. This shall allow me to put into perspective some aspects of the epistemological frame underlying performing arts studies: the conception of new and the conception of the audience.<sup>2</sup>

Desire is a movement going beyond oneself, a relation to an otherness, tending and opening towards another as other. The term “potential,” as distinguished from modal possibilities, emphasizes the fact that a possibility emerges, instead of a fact that can possibly be realized. As relations to another as other, to an alterity in the other, which means to nothing *given*, relations of desire are relations of potential: The other as other—nothing given—sets and keeps in motion their emergence or emanation. Precisely as relations to nothing given, relations of desire, in order to be considered or experienced as such, imply, paradoxically, a kind of detachment. Not a reflexive detachment of the persons involved in them, considering or experiencing them, but a limit that enables radical otherness to appear, and by that enables relation, desire and potentiality to emerge.

When we transfer the psychoanalytic term of desire—or the philosophical term of a good infinite—into performing arts, detachment becomes a keyword in rediscovering the setting defining the form of the happening, as well as the audience involved. Here, I intend to release the term “detachment” from the modern presupposition of a subject, whose reflexivity was thought to be its underlying support and horizon.<sup>3</sup> Literally speaking, a *skene*, the stage in ancient Greek, presents a detachment: a space-time detached from a continuum. A detachment, however, does not necessarily need a stage in the conventional sense of the term, a cut in a continuum, in order to be a detachment. For instance, an intensification taking place in the midst of unfolding relations can be qualified as a kind of detachment too, if it allows the activity of the unfolding relations to be exposed as such. The activity of relating is detached—according to the etymology of the word: absolute—when it relates simultaneously to a limit in itself. Touching upon the limit of relating, and thus upon nothingness in this relating to itself, enables it as flow, it enables its activity to be addressed as such. Copjec’s account of desire in the Hegelian terms of a “good infinite” (Copjec 1994) is thus not only very pertinent, it is also very relevant in the context of this discussion on performance as art. The parallel with Hegel’s account of artwork is striking—provided that we consider it from the point of view of art and not from the point of view of his teleology of history (Tatari 2017): Hegel describes an artwork as a concrete infinite that takes place in a finite, sensuous exteriority.

Relations of desire are thus not relations between given terms. The stage—a detachment—enables relations to occur as never-given relations: it opens up for those related—among others, those traditionally called spectators, beholders or audience—a never-given relation, a never-given commonality, a common as actuality of a potentiality. We could call this a universal. If we understand the stage in the strong sense of what enables the free flow of relating in a here and now, then the question of what constitutes or what functions as a stage becomes crucial in order to understand what allows the unfoldment of a happening to address an audience as a non-given commonality: what transforms the beholders or spectators into an audience distinguished from a given community. If we cling to the word “art” as implying an open audience (a *publicum*, distinguished from the given communities implied for example in rituals and cult practices), the question of what constitutes a stage becomes crucial in order to understand if and to what extent a precise happening is a kind of (performing) art: to what extent it actualizes a universal in its audience.<sup>4</sup>

The term “power” is often, as in the call of the current issue, used in place of “sovereignty,” in order to designate a disenchantment felt toward political sovereignty, which for many has proved to be impossible and has ended up as an infinite striving for dominance. Relations of power and dominance evade alterity or nothingness in themselves; they strive to capture the other, to eliminate (instead of sublimate) its otherness, and thus to infinitely expand. This expansion, in its contemporary form, seems to have eroded the transcendental ground of ends which defined the modern subject, turning to an all-encompassing sphere of techno-economic commandment, whose infinite expansion—a “bad infinite”—has become an end in itself. Powerlessness and resistance are its correlates. Negatively defined by power, they share the same frame with it. The origin of this “bad infinite” is the striving for autonomy as sovereignty.

And yet this scheme of autonomy, with its correlated purposiveness, is shifting under technological conditions so radically that while nothing seems to be bare of the techno-economic commandment, all concepts of politics grounded upon transcendental purposiveness mutate. If this is so, then resistance, suspense or inactivation of this process, insofar as they are inscribed in this same scheme of sovereignty, also lose the ground upon which they might apply. This, among other things, may have provided the background for Jean-Luc Nancy’s objection to Giorgio Agamben on the occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic, the latter seeing in the current state of exemption a total exercise of power over life as biopolitics at the cost of “bare life,” evoking (in other contexts) resistance as the passive act of inactivating sovereignty, liberating its “inoperativity.”<sup>5</sup>

On the occasion of this pandemic, Nancy amplifies a thesis he has been defending in recent years (Nancy 2020b). He sees this virus as entangled with the scheme of progress, the striving for autonomy that as a “bad infinite” has defined western civilization, ending in the technoeconomic machinery of today. As he has been claiming in recent years, our time is subject to a deep transformation—a mutation—of this civilization, comparable to the transformation that followed the end of the ancient world (Nancy 2020a). If I were to summarize this complex philosophical thesis, I would say that what is at stake is, in my view, the way western civilization—has hitherto

dealt with the infinite (with the heterogeneous, with alterity), since the end of the archaic hierarchical world, which handed human beings their human condition. The virus is currently exposing us to our finiteness, while all striving to sublimate finiteness into forms of autonomy—as progress, as projection to future—have turned out to be colonial and have ended in destruction.

Can the experience of finiteness give rise to an actual, a good infinite, here and now, not on a personal, individual level, but on the level of culture and society? Can a non-given common take place as a relation to alterity that does not strive to sublimate the human condition in a form of autonomy?

Nancy does not claim to provide an answer, because, as he underlines, all current projects, all temptations to give a solution, all strategies, even when meant negatively as resistance, only result from the logic of the striving for autonomy, today dissolved in technoeconomic dominance (Nancy-Tatari 2020). However, he asks this question and takes a stance, standing for an autonomy which is not the autonomy of a subject, but, on the contrary, that of a singular existing each time as relating, meant as plural singularity of existence as being-out and beyond, as becoming. Trying to bring together two different philosophical traditions, that of a finite transcendence and that of a philosophy of becoming (and in re-elaborating beyond Heidegger the Heideggerean concept of *Brauchen, gebrauchtsein*: the fact of existing as being used by being, that Heidegger relates to the Augustinean enjoyment),<sup>6</sup> Nancy seems to me to be touching the limits of what can be thought.

Nancy's objection concerning the extent of the shift of the transcendental frame—the question, if it is right to speak, as he does, of a deep mutation of the western-globalized civilization—cannot be proven on an argumentative basis. However, the epistemological, theological or philosophical presuppositions underlying political theories as well as performing-art theories, the implicit frame of the ways the current phenomena are perceived and analyzed, can and must be discussed. New facts are not to be blindly applied in old thinking categories; the conceptual ground, the thinking categories themselves have to be reexamined in order to take account of the current state of things: what is the epistemological framework of contemporary, allegedly non-subject-based, theories of resistance in the field of performing arts? How are we to grasp theoretically, for instance, the emergence of new forms, if the new is no longer seen as a progressive self-realisation of history, of politics, of meaning?

### Art and the Archimedean point

The concept of art as a singular subsuming the plurality of fine arts, is an invention of western philosophy. It emerged within the transcendental frame of the subject. In this frame, it was meant to actualize a purposiveness with no purpose.<sup>7</sup> In the tradition drawing on Kant and extending to postmodern theories, art is meant to be on the one hand distinguished from political sovereignty, while on the other hand co-constituting its internal difference, suspending, in-activating or keeping in suspense all purpose. If today the concept of “art” shifts and is substituted by terms such as “art practices” keen to “resist power,” we should not forget that the relation to purposiveness, framing art in its modern understanding, shifts too. While “dynamics of power” are without a doubt at work

in the field of performing arts, and while they doubtless condition their institutions, their production, the making and perceiving of performances, and the subjectivities of artists, producers, curators, and audiences, one could still argue that these dynamics of power do not *absolutely* condition them.

Capitalism and techno-economic dominance do indeed form a sphere of total commandment, a sphere of all spheres of life. However, this totality exists as such from the perspective of sovereignty, whose modern transcendental frame, one could argue, is being dissolved. If this is so, there is no sphere of all spheres of the kind implied by the modern subject, no totality other than the market. This means that more is happening than this total techno-economic commandment, even if it happens within it. Timothy Morton puts it provocatively: the whole is less than the sum of its parts.<sup>8</sup> I would say that this is just another way to take into consideration a concrete or good infinite, an infinite which is in the finite and is not to be subsumed by any totality, cannot be projected onto a horizon, as modern philosophies of conscience believed in their striving for autonomy. Transposed into the context of the topic discussed here, this means the following: From the point of view of power, relations of desire and potential might be resisting. However, they simultaneously present an absolute (a detachment, a limit) taking place in themselves. They are the autonomy of a heteronomy, the autonomy of an affective relation as its emanation. As such, they are not to be examined only from the perspective of sovereignty or power and of its correlative inactivation or renegotiation. This, in fact, is the challenge today: to understand how the shift of the transcendental frame affects the taking-form of performing arts.

Relations of desire are set and kept in motion by a radical alterity or nothingness, and are driven towards a “more,” a going-beyond-onself. When turning their back to nothingness, they become relations of dominance. Not by chance is death as sacrifice the crucial moment for the emergence of sovereignty in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998).<sup>9</sup> When death exits a given sacrificial order and enters the polis, the impossible sacrifice of bare life becomes the founding moment for political sovereignty as endless striving for autonomy. For Agamben, all social activity is grounded upon it. Turning its back to its ungroundedness, sovereignty strives endlessly for its own purposiveness. Caught in this tension, everything in the present is bound to an ever more demanding purposiveness to which it responds. It is bound up with an endless answerability. The present is indebted to a future that endlessly demands more.<sup>10</sup> Having turned its back to its own condition, striving to sublate death, today we could say that this striving is a striving to become superhuman, posthuman or transhuman.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the existing inequalities become even more flagrant, death—to which projecting and planning the future had turned its back—re-enters the stage. The human condition—that which is common to all humans—reappears in the midst of the techno-economic striving for limitless expansion. The end of the human sacrifice in a given hierarchical archaic order, exposed human beings to their human condition – mortality, setting in motion the striving for sovereignty (the polis). The human condition makes a new entrance on stage, while the transcendental deduction of purposiveness—and with it altogether political sovereignty in its modern form— may no longer apply.

It is precisely at this point that Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* becomes relevant. It is noteworthy that Arendt defines what she calls "human condition" neither as a matter of human nature nor as a matter of truth or of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Instead, she traces the emergence of the human condition—not a precise condition, but the fact of being conditioned [*Bedingtheit*—back to a cultural moment that coincides with what is usually considered to be the beginning of occidental culture. Mortality comes to the fore as-such: life exits a natural given order and movement is brought into light.<sup>12</sup> This coming to the fore as such, one could argue, is in itself a kind of autonomy, since the human condition, coming to the fore as such, implies a dealing with an unconditional. It can be understood as the emergence of the concern for autonomy in western cultural history. And indeed, in Arendt's view, it bequeaths to this culture the concern and striving for autonomy, setting in motion a series of transformations of activity which Arendt describes in this book. If today, at the other end of this cultural history, Arendt's position becomes relevant, it is not merely because she describes these transformations, but because she describes them from a particular standpoint.

The coming to the fore of the human condition does indeed bring something unconditional to light. However, Arendt sees this unconditional in the ability of human activity to begin, actualised in speech and action, as distinguished from the autonomy striven for by a "self." Her standpoint is rigorously distinguished from all kinds of striving for sublation or overcoming of the human condition in the autonomy of a self—be it philosophy, knowledge, theology, or sovereignty. She advocates for the unconditional of the human condition as natality, and thus for freedom; but not for the (impossible) freedom of a subject, which strives for sublating otherness (and contingency) as in the process of recognition. Arendt's standpoint is not Agamben's "*se*."<sup>13</sup> It is natality coming to the fore as such in human action, and natality implies plurality as a fact in a shared world in the present moment, not as the result of a process. This is precisely the reason why I find it important to mention Arendt in this context: because she sees in the human condition (in the fact of being conditioned) an unconditional (as freedom, or as beginning)—an in-finite, we could say, to make the connection to the previous terms—that as such opens up a common, without providing a measure or a principle for this common: a common as plurality of beginnings, not as oneness of a universal principle. To avoid misunderstandings: I am not examining here the modality that she acknowledges to the common—the space of appearance as political: neither the problems related to her conception of politics nor her conception of power (term that she uses in a clearly distinct way to the one mentioned above). What is relevant here is her standpoint, which is rigorously different from the claim for universality of the modern subject. All criticism of Arendt's thought, including her conception of the political, should first be confronted with the particularity of this standpoint.

The standpoint from which Arendt casts an eye on the history of western civilisation and on the ways of thinking that we take for granted does not provide or seek for a measure to understand reality.<sup>14</sup> Literally speaking, it is not a standpoint but a stance: a praxis, an ethos, an attitude. It is noteworthy that there is nothing Arendt criticises more harshly than the utilitarian consequences of what she calls the discovery of an Archimedean point, a discovery (first ascribed to Galileo) of a perspective from which earthly things can be measured and observed as if from an outside. It is

through this discovery that the Christian-Jewish “sacredness of life” turned to “life as the highest good” in modern times. Arendt understands the emergence of Cartesian doubt as having been made possible by this discovery, as well as the transcendental understanding of the world *in toto*: not only the processuality of nature, but also processual subjectivity, history as the processual realisation of its purposiveness, and of course the very notion of progress, which measures reality from the perspective of its alleged purposiveness. Arendt sees human beings in modern times as worldless: they lack a common world in present time because they are thrown back into a self, indebted to and projected towards the future.

In Arendt’s view, even Kant’s famous formula that no man must ever become a means to an end and that every human being is an end in themselves has its origin in the utilitarianism that results from serving life as the highest good. She sees Kant’s formula as an attempt to prevent the use of the means-end category in the field of political action. However, in Arendt’s opinion, even Kant fails, just as he does in his paradoxical interpretation of man’s attitude towards the only objects that are not “for use”: namely works of art, in which, he says, we take “pleasure without interest.” Not even Kant could solve this problem, she says, as the same operation which establishes man as the “supreme end” permits him “if he can to subject the whole of nature to it,” that is, to degrade nature and the world into mere means, robbing both of their independent dignity (Arendt 1998, 155–159).

This is important to us here, because it shows what is at stake: the measure for all things. Arendt replies to Kant by echoing Plato, saying that it is not man—who wishes to use everything and therefore ends by depriving all things of their intrinsic worth—but god that is the measure even of mere use objects (*ibid*). Here, god is a philosophical god who presents an unmeasurable measure—as do human beings according to Kant. However, god presents a measure which is not in the disposition of human beings. Arendt sees Kant in the heritage of *vita contemplativa*, whose framework remained (according to her) intact even after its reversal in modern times and in modernity: the oneness of principle—here the oneness of a measure—subordinating all activity. With the discovery of an Archimedean point, this measure comes into the hands of human beings, the price being—as Arendt, quoting Kafka, repeatedly reminds us—that they use it against themselves: “he found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself. It seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition” (248). Arendt carries out in this book a view on human activity which does not subordinate activity to the oneness of a measure implied and inherited by *vita contemplativa*.

And nevertheless, her account of western cultural history is not relativist. On the contrary, she radically changes the perspective upon ways of thinking and acting that we take for granted. Yet, she does not project into the past alternative ideas about the evolution of history. Instead, she criticises such enterprises as “dangerous” and “vain.”<sup>15</sup> Arendt does not seek for solutions to the aporetic striving for autonomy in western civilisation—a solution to the contradictions of the Greek, Hebrew, Roman, Christian world and of the modern times. She advocates for the unconditional that comes to the fore with the human condition throughout all the different cultural moments and transformations of activity, without seeing in it an Archimedean point, and thus also without inscribing it positively or negatively into a process—as does, for example, Agamben’s inactivation



of sovereignty. It appears to me that it is precisely this stance that makes her thinking particularly relevant today. The stance which stands for the common without implying a measure or striving to sublimate a measure for this common in a form of autonomy; the stance which stands on the edge of the human condition, the “cut” of its natality, enabling the emergence of new: a finite transcendence.

### After the “posts”

If powerlessness has today become a relevant subject to performing art studies, this is also connected to a shift we are witnessing concerning the perception and the taking-form of arts. The emergence of new forms testifies today to the fading of an Archimedean point: the fading of a point from which to cast an eye on them. The narratives of new forms as emerging by overcoming the previous fade, while at the same time the concern for a free emanation of relation—as never-given common or as demand for equality—persist: in postcolonial or anthropocentric criticism, in artistic interventions as subversion, resistance or even as feeling of powerlessness. It seems to me that the challenge we face now is to understand how purposiveness shifts.

In the contemporary scene of performing arts, the narratives of an evolution of forms seem to have lost their validity. Until the beginning of the 21st century, in spite of all the criticism of the western concept and history of art, in spite of all the criticism of the Enlightenment’s faith in progress, and even despite the criticism of the transcendental scheme itself, the new in art had been framed and felt as an overcoming of the older forms. This was the case for “postdramatic” theatre, for the “performance-turn,” but even more recently for “posthuman” art. The idea that artforms respond to their present time was shaped in modern times: the idea that they respond to their present time by giving to it a form, by opening up in it something new, a potential projected to future (Hegel remains the most emblematic name for this idea). The change of artforms has been related to historical change, both as a result and as anticipation. Modernity projected this idea of art retrospectively into the past as well as into other, non-Western cultures – a colonial process. In the core of this idea lies a precise understanding of the relationality—of the “relations of desire and potential”—at stake in artforms.

Relations of desire go beyond oneself and exceed the given. If they are exposed as such, they allow for a never-given-common—a never-given relation—to be addressed. A never-given-common is also what the demand for equality demands. Art, this modern invention, in contrast to cult and ritual practices, had to be new each time, because it was addressing not the given common of a community, but a non-given common in its audience (a *publicum*). Hence this can only be addressed each time under the conditions of its time, because it has to bring into play a common irreducible to any given. The new in art, the change of artforms has been related to this demand and has been interpreted as progress. All kinds of “post”-art: postmodern, postdramatic, and posthuman (recently, some have even tried to speak of postcontemporary art) do not simply designate a new artform, nor simply an artform that gives form to their present time. They also connect overcoming the older forms to a better realization of the demand for equality in historical time (for example, by including non-human or non-Western realities).<sup>16</sup> However this scheme as a



whole is currently shifting. Under the current technological and postcolonial conditions, there is no one horizon to project change, and no one history to understand the present.

Obviously, no deconstruction of dramatic form undertaken today can have the effect it had one or two decades ago. Nor can any overcoming of the supposed dualities in performance. The question of how the new comes into presence is connected to or presupposes an experience of extreme limit; instead of being limited, the experience of extreme limit finds in this limit the possibility of address as such – that is to say, the emanation of relation as such. There has to be a touching on nothing, a limit, an ab-solute or a detachment, in order for relation to be addressed as such: for a non-given and non-determinable common to take place. As long as one horizon was being projected onto one history, this experience might have signified the fight and death of the older forms. Today the forms of the past do not disappear. They are, perhaps, reaching up to us in different ways. The question, then, is this: Where is the limit that allows a process or a happening to be related to others as to an open audience (a *publicum*), which means addressing this very relation instead of disappearing in it? It is not a limit in the sense of allowing newness to arrive into history. It is, rather, a limit as enabling the space of appearance. The space of appearance of this excessive relating called “new” in art, is what is primarily affected by the current shift, and what has to be reexamined. We have to ask what constitutes an (open) audience and how it is being transformed, when the framing of subjectivities shifts. Excessive relating—excessive because exceeding the given—should be examined today as the question of audience.

Instead of a new “turn” of forms, the current landscape of performing arts is dominated by an immediate demand for political relevance, as well as by the correlative feeling of powerlessness. This can, however, no longer be grasped in terms of an opposition between autonomous and politically engaged art, because the framework of this opposition can no longer apply. We keep understanding all kinds of criticism of the Enlightenment according to the logic of the Enlightenment, as long as we bring what exceeds the given, in the service of future: we do so either in the name of excluded “blackness,” in the name of a fluid renegotiation of power, or of non-human techno-ecologies. Hence this persistence of the demand for equality under conditions of dissolution of the oneness of the common (oneness now denounced as colonial violence, anthropocentrism, total techno-economic commandment and dominance) requires that we revise our thinking categories: it requires that we revise its understanding of it as being in the service of future. We could then say that it is in fact the framing of what is a form that shifts, and with it the very notion of audience, the space of appearance, the space in which relation accesses an extreme limit and enables its free course, its emanation to be addressed.

Today, addressing the present, addressing a “we” as non-given common, giving it a form, means a relating—desire, the praxis of relating as such—as an emanation which is set (and kept) in motion by an alterity or a nothingness, that strangely cannot be attributed to “us”: neither providing us with a provenance (in the sense of “our” un-groundedness) nor with a destination (as purposiveness). This shift might be something that the urge for decolonialisation of arts and aesthetics feels when it denounces the oneness of Western-global horizon for its blindness, as well as something that techno-ecologies and affect ecologies feel when denouncing anthropocentrism.

At present, the human condition, making a new entrance on stage in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemics, intensifies the gap between power—the sovereignty-machine—on the one hand, and the dissolution of the transcendental (which means the subject-based) frame on the other. We don't yet know what rhythms and constellations of presence are about to emerge in the performing arts, which will now be punctuated by new kinds of suspense. However, we can take a stand for that which punctuates the emergence of forms, without projecting in it an Archimedean point.

### Sandra Man and Moritz Majce – Anne Imhof: stage and audience

The taking-form of forms is thus not newness in the sense of overcoming the previous forms, and its potential—the excess of the given—is not (social) change projected into a horizon. If, speaking epistemologically, we do not take for granted the presupposition of a transcendental frame in order to define and analyse what constitutes a stage and its audience, these two terms, “stage” and “audience,” become a key for understanding the emergence of forms. Insofar as they are not pre-framed, they open a whole research field that can help us understand the shifts we are facing today. I will, however, restrict myself here to discussing two performances that can help me to show what I mean by excessive—and detached—relating.

The first of these, Sandra Man and Moritz Majce's *Narcosis*, presented in 2017 at Open Spaces Festival in Tanzfabrik in Berlin, performs in a very direct way “relating as stage” and “plasticity as audience.” *Narcosis* is constituted in two parts. The first part of the evening is a meditation on space, on the composition and the recasting of its elements. Two canvases on the long axis of the room show two gazing eyes, thematising seeing in theater: Ledoux's *Theater von Besançon* and Magritte's *The wrong mirror*. Between these eyes, in the middle of the room, the audience and the chorus come together. They take a seat: the chorus are seated on turning chairs, while the audience sits around the chorus. Instead of being only an object to be stared at, the chorus, who slowly turns the chairs in all directions, stares at the people in the audience, directly in the eyes, but in a special way: the gazes of the silent chorus address each one in a non-personal way, staring right into their eyes and beyond the person who is being stared at at the same time, as if addressing an otherness in each one whilst keeping the unfoldment of relating open, opening spaces in turning directions, and bringing the space into movement.

In the second part of *Narcosis* the arrangement changes: a single dancer is in the center, sitting nude on the ground. The audience sits around him, also on the ground, and the space is dark, with a fade spot of light on the dancer. A dance-solo inspired by Caravaggio's *Narcissus* begins and a voice starts speaking from offstage. It is a voice that addresses an undefined “you”: “I am looking at you;” a loving voice seeking the fragmented body, zooming in on its surface. From the image of Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, a “you” emerges, turning into a minimal dance-solo in the middle of the dark room. Reflecting on the water, the nude *Narcissus* in chiaroscuro extends in space in slow micro-movements of light and duration. Far from narcissism, this *Narcissus* exposes a relation to an otherness, coming to the foreground out of and in a self-relation: as perceivable surface at the place where, through darkness, light and shadow, relationality is exposed at the edge of manifestation. It is the praxis of self-relating as relating to an open other, addressing what in the

relation is an indefinable you, and thus what sets relating in motion and keeps it in motion, what keeps it flowing freely.

According to Schiller, freedom in appearance is beauty; the image turns into a dance, in which, as in breathing, the inside of the body turns to an outside, the outside to an inside. During this solo, images of nature are projected on the canvases: two videos showing a lake, one horizontal and very calm, one vertical and agitated, filmed by a drone. While the dance estranges the image, turning it into movement, the lake-videos expose to the audience another “other,” another “outside”: nature. Between listening to the offstage voice and looking, the audience is immersed into a stream of relating, sinking under the surface of forms—as in narcosis—and coming to the surface again, precisely at the point of manifestation: in the place where two hands or one hand and a foot touch each other in a vacuum, in the place where they come to the fore (as in the film shown at the end of the piece, projected on the canvas): hands, feet, legs, arms emerging again and again, with the audience dispersed throughout the room in between them, listening and looking, until the phrase “I am being numbed by myself” closes the piece.

This piece does not confront or fight a given arrangement of the world. Instead, it intervenes in our perception and restores it to its underlying plasticity or formability. *Narcosis* dives under the level of contents, identities and given forms, under the level of that which is being shown, down to the point at which “the eye rotates in its hollow.” It is not just a meditation on seeing. It opens up a space in which, for the duration of an evening, the audience can be an audience: it can be affected by the action of a gathering, which is deeply resistant to any given order. The piece addresses and enables a non-given-common as relation. It actualizes it in its audience as well as in the performers, and bears it along, bearing it jointly together.

The second performance I would like to discuss is Anne Imhof’s *Faust*, which won the Golden Lion for the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and has been largely discussed from the point of view of biopolitics and the question of power/powerlessness. However, the question that interests me here is still the question of the stage: what, in the factual enfoldment of this performance, enables the experience of relation as emanating, and, correlatively, what opens up a non-given relation in its audience? *Faust*, in Goethe’s tragedy, accounts for modern subjectivity: autonomy as tension between an absolute present and a becoming.<sup>17</sup> In my view, Anne Imhof’s *Faust*, which borrows only its name from Goethe, offers the experience of a becoming that, instead of being projected into the future, lingers in the present moment and opens a surplus in it.

The German pavilion is converted so that it simultaneously gives the impression of a fortress and of complete transparency. The visitors stand and walk through the space on a second glass floor installed in the pavilion. The portico is enclosed by glass walls, creating two exterior spaces in which dogs—Dobermans—are placed. Performers “occupy” (in Imhof’s words) the building. They are sometimes underneath and sometimes on top of the glass floor, among the audience, or above them on pedestals, hanging from the uppermost area of the building on safety belts, or outside on the fence. There is no structured audience; instead, there is a crowd. People fill the space to its maximum, but despite this, each person is exposed to visibility: floating over the glass floor,

reflected in the glass while gazing at the performers on the other side of it, underneath the floor, or right beside us. We are in the midst of the contemporary technologically conditioned world; most of the people are holding smartphones directly in front of the faces of the performers, taking pictures of them. There is a latent violence, both in the transparency of the building and in the emergence of borders in the construction, creating limitations and exclusions, as well as in the processes of the performance, which in its full length lasts many hours. Small procedures, such as slow movements, walking out of a fall, a fire underneath the glass floor, singing, checking messages, an ambivalent violence, fighting or sexually embracing, as if going down a catwalk.

What is immediately striking is the intensity. The piece is a fist, a *Faust*. This “Faust,” which also figures as a logo on the clothing of some of the performers, is one of the main gestures in the choreography. Some of the critics saw an inexpressiveness in the faces of the performers: something zombie-like, between death and life. Imhof speaks of an “opening.” I saw a self-emptiness, which, with genuine attentivity, addresses nothing less than the emanation of the moment as relation. Under the surveillance of this installation, in the latent violence of the performance, the intensity of this “Faust” that immediately infects the crowd is an emptying of everything that does not address the emergence in the space and the moment. Over, under, and through the glass surfaces. In the very midst of “us.”

Imhof designates her work as a painting, not as a performance. The painterly quality that Imhof seeks in the performance can be seen in the quality or intensity that allows for the contact point of a surface to emerge, to come to the fore for itself. It is not about the autonomy of a subject; it is the autonomy of a contact point. The contact point that is in itself a living relationality, for example between spectators and performers, autonomously comes to the fore *as-such*, as the free action of its own emanation. A surface, when presented as such, is the excess over the surface, the gesture of its presentation itself, an open relating. Beauty, another word that Imhof uses to designate her work, is precisely a free emanating appearance, the beauty that marks this performance despite the darkness.

The relationality of exposing as well as of interacting—because we physically push one another in the crowd in order to follow the diverse actions of the performers—is traced back to the act of its own appearing. “There is no piece without spectators,” Imhof says, and she furthermore underlines how important it was for her to work with many performers. It mattered to her that they would initiate actions. A beginning takes place in all of the contact points of this performance that are exposed *as-such*, for their own sake, in the midst of an unstructured crowd, a crowd with no beginning and no end. As this crowd, “we”—we who are seen, visible and simultaneously seeing, taking pictures—are ourselves exposed to the contact point of these pictures. Coming to the fore as if on stage for its own sake, this contact point opens up a space of appearance: the space of an open emanation of relating. In our technological or biopolitical world, it allows the experience of an excess of the given, which, instead of indebting our attention to the future, to something pointed out, exposes its infinite emanation in the now. The contact point of relating, coming to the fore as such, is an autonomous, free act. It is not the freedom of a subject; instead, it is the relational excess that makes up and recasts our present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the distinction of desire from bad infinity see Joan Copjec 2015. Besides desire, Copjec sees a “good infinite” at work also in the Freudian concept of drive as distinguished from instinct: drive as “out-of-jointness” presents an infinite in the order of finitude. Furthermore, Copjec remarks that Lacan, in his Ethics Seminar, ascribes to capitalism a bad infinite, an infinite deferral of the desire.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of what is epistemologically at stake when drawing philosophically on the difference between good and bad infinity, see Tatari 2017. The study offers a contemporary reading of Hegel's *Aesthetics* in order to put into perspective the underlying epistemologies that frame performing-art studies and address the conceptual shift we are facing under the current technological conditions. For an interdisciplinary examination of this question see Tatari 2014. Furthermore, on the political stake of this distinction see, among others, Nancy 2010 and Nancy 2020a.

<sup>3</sup> The same goes, for example, for Brecht's *Verfremdung* or estrangement, a word with a rich theatrical history extending well beyond Brecht: it can but doesn't necessarily have to be meant as reflexive distance; it can but doesn't necessarily have to be interpreted on the basis of the modern subject and of the potentialities this subject projects into its horizon.

<sup>4</sup> On this redefinition of the terms “stage,” “audience,” and “relation,” see Tatari 2017. By this redefinition, the book strives to open access to the history and the analysis of performing arts not inscribed in the logic of modern subject and its overcoming. It asks what can be considered as “stage” under different cultural conditions—from the detached exposition of a self-relation in classical drama to “stage” as intensification in immersive performances or to hybrid art-forms with no beginning and end.

<sup>5</sup> On the coronavirus pandemic see European Journal of Psychoanalysis 2020, Agamben 2020a, Agamben 2020b, *Philosopher au présent* 2020a, *Philosopher au présent* 2020b, Dutent 2020. Furthermore, on Agamben's theory see, among others, Agamben 1998 and Agamben 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See Heidegger 2015.

<sup>7</sup> From Kant's definition of beauty as purposiveness without purpose to the definition of art in German Idealism as a form of an absolute, as well as in all the tradition originating in Kant, including Adorno, Heidegger and postmodern aesthetics.

<sup>8</sup> See Morton 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Even if Agamben avoids the terms finitude, death or nothingness and emphasizes instead the violent character of sacrifice as *contra naturam* activity, it is, according to him, the “ungroundedness” of human activity itself which constitutes the violent character of sacrifice, positing its ground by itself. The modern sacralization of life derives from sacrifice, which does “nothing other than abandon bare natural life to its own violence and its own foreignness, in order then to ground all cultural rules and social praxis in it” (Agamben 2000, 136).

<sup>10</sup> “Everything” includes biological life in this case. For an analysis of this “answerability” even on the level of “flesh” see Santner 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows. [...] If we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a “who” as if though it were a “what.” [...] This is why attempts to define human nature almost invariably end with some construction of deity, that is, with the god of the philosophers, who, since Plato, has revealed himself upon closer inspection to be a kind of Platonic idea of man [...] the fact that attempts to define the nature of man lead so easily into an idea which definitely strikes us as “superhuman” and therefore is identified with the divine may cast suspicion upon the very concept of “human nature.” [...] Modern natural science owes its great triumphs to having looked upon and treated earth-bound nature from a truly universal point, that is, from an Archimedean standpoint taken, wilfully and explicitly outside the earth.” (Arendt 1998, 9–11)

<sup>12</sup> “The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. [...] This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.” (Arendt 1998, 19)

<sup>13</sup> See “Se” in Agamben 2000, 116–137.

<sup>14</sup> There is a common misunderstanding in Arendt-studies: that Arendt sees in Greek or Roman an ideal, since she finds in them her key notions of the “space of appearance” and of the “common world.” Even Margaret Canovan, who wrote the introduction to the second edition of *The Human Condition*, remarks that Arendt “finds in ancient Greece an Archimedean point from which to cast a critical eye on ways of thinking and behaving that we take for granted” (Arendt 1998, vii–viii). Yet Arendt is unambiguously clear on her stance and her standpoint, which does not constitute an Archimedean point. This might even be the fundamental thinking gesture of this book. All criticism against Arendt’s understanding of the public sphere and of her contempt for the privacy of life should in my view be examined on this basis.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt sees speculations of this type concerning an alternative course of history as “idle and even dangerous when used as arguments against reality and when meant to point to positive potentialities and alternatives,” notably because they “lack the tangible unexpectedness of the event” (Arendt 1998, 252). And, I would add, because they proceed from the scheme of a self, a “se” projecting improvements and progress onto a historical horizon.

<sup>16</sup> Until the beginning of the 21st century, the relationality which is at stake in artforms was still perceived as it was under modernity: that is, it was perceived as a non-hierarchical and all-inclusive “we” to come—whether in Derrida’s and Agamben’s terms as always to come, suspended in the present, never given, open to its non-giveness, or as disillusionment with and denouncing of the utopias in which the 20th century still placed its trust, as in Lyotard’s “sublime,” vertiginous, postmodern art, or by permanently subverting given orders and hierarchies—for instance between spectators and actors, beholders and art objects, keeping open the non-given common, as in many positions ranging from Rancière to Butler and theories of performativity; or as non-anthropocentric subverting of the established hierarchies between humans and non-humans (as in new materialisms, in techno-ecologies and Object Oriented Ontologies). All these theories can—at least from a certain point of view and to an extent—be considered as variations of the modern scheme of conceiving art, history and the evolution of artforms in their relation to history as progress, history as a project for better realizing the demand for equality and art as progressively contributing to this goal—even if it is a goal impossible to achieve, whether as a tragedy or as an open horizon.

<sup>17</sup> See Wellbery 2004, 546–51.

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## Biography

Marita Tatari, deputy Professor for Aesthetics at the HMDK Stuttgart, completed her PhD in Philosophy under the supervision of Jean-Luc Nancy in Strasbourg in 2005 and her Habilitation (second thesis) at the Ruhr University Bochum in 2017. She was an Alexander von Humboldt-fellow at the University of California at Berkeley (2018–2019) and at ZfL Berlin (2020–2021). Books: *Ästhetische Universalität – Vom fortbestehenden Wir* (Metzler, forthcoming); *Cum – Weiterdenken mit Jean-Luc Nancy* (coed., diaphanes, forthcoming); *Kunstwerk als Handlung – Transformationen von Ausstellung und Teilnahme* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2017); *Orte des Unermesslichen – Theater nach der Geschichtsteologie*, ed. (diaphanes 2014); *Heidegger et Rilke* (L'Harmattan 2013).

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