



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY 7(2): IMAGINING THE OPEN

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I believe that we are in an imagination battle, and almost everything about how we orient toward our bodies is shaped by fearful imaginations. [...] Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality.

adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism* (2019, 10)

We have discovered the performance by making it.

Goat Island Performance Group

We—Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, Will Daddario, Diana Damian Martin, and Theron Schmidt—are delighted to introduce this latest issue of the *Performance Philosophy* journal. As feels entirely fitting to us, this is an issue that has taken on a life of its own—disrupting the form, structures, and temporal conventions of the journal through the way in which it has manifested itself.

With this open edition of the journal, we find ourselves back again face to face with the premise of the “open,” which is an exciting and paradoxical concept. The mission statement for this journal proposes, “Performance Philosophy is an emerging interdisciplinary field of thought, creative practice and scholarship. As an international, peer-reviewed, open access journal, *Performance Philosophy* publishes work that interrogates what this field might be and what might be possible within it.” If something—say, a territory, a field, a possibility—is truly open, then do we ever leave it? Pure openness seems to suggest the absence of a boundary that would transform open to closed. As such, we never really “return” to the open. We’re always in it, always-already *of it*—whether we imagine ourselves within “the open” or not. Does, then, the premise of an “open edition” bring us to the plane of immanence, and, if so, are we faced with certain ethical challenges? The most obvious of these challenges is the act of exclusion that comes with the role of “editing.” In a truly open edition, we wouldn’t exclude any of the proposed submissions because, again, what isn’t included in the open? So, ah ha!, our edition isn’t really open. The “open” here refers to something else. It is, for the most part, a word that identifies a lack of a governing theme to this edition, and the issuing of an “open call.” And yet, while perhaps not “open” in the philosophical sense, the edition is shaped by a desire for the open. Performance Philosophy is not a field with clearly defined boundaries. *Performance Philosophy* seeks to help figure out the shape of Performance Philosophy through, amongst other things, the very doing of scholarship.

Philosophical considerations of openness play out in the (seemingly) practical task of editing a journal (this journal). For this edition, 7(2), we invited contributions on *whatever* topic. (Here we might recall Giorgio Agamben’s [1993] distinction between whatever as indifference—the shrug of “I don’t care, whatever”—and whatever as singularity, as that which arrives before us “*such as it is*.”) We received numerous responses and chose ones that, we felt, gave a good sense of the diversity of flora and fauna in the always-emergent field of Performance Philosophy. But a problem presented itself (Yay!). We seemed to have more pieces for the [Margins] section than for the “central” section that is usually populated with “essays” or “articles” of some kind. The Margins, in other words, overtook the Center. How lovely. But what, then, do we make of the distinction between margin and non-margin? Is it totally arbitrary? Must we parcel out the field? Does this porosity offer us scope to consider performance philosophy as seeking to untangle distinctions between center and margins? [Margins] then contracts and expands across different parts of this journal’s iteration. Whilst [Margins] concerns itself with creative, non-standard approaches to the manifold relations arising at the conjunction between performance and philosophy, in this issue this formal provocation spills out, or rather, as the section spills out, so does the question of how we think and do performance philosophy. Across a meditation on flicker (Blum), an auto-fictional reflection on practicing *khayal* (Shankar), an interactive project on eavesdropping (Jones and Wilkins), an experimental sonic work that attempts to sound out “incompossibility” (Tromans and Schmidt), or a video-essay on whiteness and embodiment (Spatz and collaborators), “open” emerges as a speculative and porous question. [Margins] insists on, perhaps playfully offers, a refusal to uphold distinctions between form and content, or between critical and speculative, and in doing so, *performs* the many ecologies of thinking and doing performance philosophy. In this way, our open issue echoes other openings, too.

We have called some works “articles” as a description of their form, characterised by sustained argument or analysis and supported by scholarly cross-referencing. But here, too, are “imagination battles” (brown 2019), carving out space to think, feel, to remember the past differently and to imagine new futures. These take the form of an essay that draws on Benjamin’s conception of the caesura to imagine UK-based Phoenix Dance Theatre’s performance *Black Waters* (2020), itself a re-habitation of colonial violence, as a possible decolonial encounter with white spectators (Kittlaus); along with a close reading on the impact of John Cage’s thinking and practice—themselves inseparable from each other—and the way they reveal the ethnocentric disciplining of our acts of listening (Lomnitz). They take the form of two essays that explore the origins and futures of performance and philosophy: a meticulous survey of the evolving significances that Sophocles’ *Antigone* has had for various philosophical disciplines and movements, marking the changing role of tragedy at the juncture between theatre and philosophy (Romanska); and a tracing of the interrelation between “drama” and “desire,” following lines of thought from the Theatre of Dionysus to Lacan’s later work on Borromean knots (Katafiasz). And they take the form of a critical self-reflection on practice-as-research that explores performance strategies related to violence on the performer’s body as a way to re-think (and re-embody) “life-as-surface”: “a life experienced in its full intensity and *in pure joy*” (Zacharopoulou).

### Special sections: SOUTH BOOM BOOM and Performance Philosophy Problems

Moreover, a temporal openness has shaped the issue—stretching out across a postponed conference and its prologue, a section spilling out, and an emergent project finding a home.

While we were contemplating this, another problem arose (Yay!). In order to showcase the work of the Key Groups who will be co-constructing the Performance Philosophy Conference in Helsinki (happening this June), we decided it would be a good idea to publish some process-oriented thoughts shared by a few of those groups. The theme of that conference is, precisely, “problems” and the nature of “collaboration,” so wouldn’t it make sense to include them in this open edition, given that the edition seems to be growing from the problem of the open? But how should this be presented? As a roundtable? As an open discussion? Should we include an editorial introduction to each? Or should we leave it to the contributors themselves to frame the terms of engagement?

And then again! Originating from a project at DAS Graduate School, Amsterdam, there is a group of writings—performative texts written by artists, gathered under the title SOUTH BOOM BOOM, that would be quite at home in this journal. But where do they go? They arrive already classified as belonging to their own group, and so they seem to deserve their own section. And, oh, because of the timing of a real-world gathering, they are seeking to be published ahead of the other articles in 7(2). Is this ok? Can we do this? Where does their section go?, we asked ourselves as editors. Is it part of [Margins]? Would it occupy a margin within [Margins]? If [Margins] has already overtaken the center, then does that mean SOUTH BOOM BOOM takes over the take-over? Should we comment on this in the editorial?

In the end we have published these two mini-collections as “special sections,” including each contribution as its own discrete “article” (with an official registered DOI), so that they reflect their origins in a particular spatiotemporal relation to their neighbours, but also recognising that they might circulate, be cited, and enter into new relationships on their own in other conversations that we have yet to imagine.

The idea of the “key group” is a core element of the 5th Biennial Performance Philosophy conference, hosted as a hybrid online/face-to-face event in June 2022 by the University of the Arts Helsinki. As part of the ongoing interest of the wider Performance Philosophy network in developing non-hierarchical and intentional forms of collective organisation, the “key group” replaces the traditional form of the “keynote,” supplanting individual expertise with group experimentation. For this event, Key Groups are supported over what was initially a year—and then became two years as COVID postponed the conference initially scheduled for 2021—in the formulation and exploration of a self-nominated “performance philosophy problem”: a dilemma or issue, both conceptual and practical, that calls for creative thinking and action or, specifically, “for dialogue and collaboration between philosophy and the performing arts.” And indeed, in addition to an externally designated theme, one of the implicit “problems” such an approach invites engagement with is the challenge of collaboration itself: what exactly *is* a key group? What does it mean to work toward a conference presentation? And what different forms might that “presentation” take? In discussing these questions as a research network, we realised a key insight was that the conference had actually already begun. That is, the conversations about the form of the conference *are* the work of the conference. In this issue, we include short provocations from three of the six Performance Philosophy Key Groups—lagunaries, Co-labouring, and AGITSATSIA—as they wrestle explicitly or implicitly with these questions. Short statements from all six groups can be found on the [conference website](#), and, if you are reading this before 15 June 2022, you are welcome to join into the gathering from wherever you are; for listings of which events are available online, see <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/events/performance-philosophy-2021/>.

SOUTH BOOM BOOM is a multi-lingual collection of performative texts originating from a project at DAS Graduate School in Amsterdam, combining contributions from artists participating in the Theatre and Choreography programs, alumni and invited guests. Edited by Mario Lopes, Flavia Pinheiro and Tom Oliver with Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, this special section is part of the larger, multi-year project SOUTH BOOM BOOM which “invites artists to discuss the importance of dissenting invisibility in art and education to contribute to knowledge on how institutions can articulate and enact an anti-racist and anti-colonial agenda.” Among the connecting threads of the texts is the affirmation of collectivity and “collective doing” (Lopes) over individualism in artistic research, resonating with the multivocal articulations of the Key Groups (not Keynotes) of Performance Philosophy’s Helsinki conference.

But there is also a specificity here wherein the “problems” at stake are ones that speak to what is both the shared and individual experience of “non-European artists” living and working in European contexts of art, education and research. The texts speak from and to these contexts differently; but one point of departure is the articulation of the “dilemma” or double-bind by

theatre maker and educator, Rodrigo Batista, who writes: "The work of non-European immigrants who propose to answer the political questions of their contexts of origin depends fundamentally on the misery they are criticizing [...] And this is where a market bubble is created: condemning immigrant artists to think in supposed solutions (or denunciations) of problems created by the continent in which we are presenting our works." Or again, as Ana Lira puts it in her preface to the section, the texts demonstrate different layers of refusal to the "visible and symbolic violence, which gains new contours in each cycle, continues to (de)mark creative lives even in territories that claim to be revising their colonial pasts, structures and methodologies." Performance philosophy problems? Perhaps. But also problems for dreaming and speculation, and for Mario Lopes, "sharing technologies, fermenting strategies, re-appropriating ownership of one's own existence, counter-academicism and an Afrotransopic community."

### Imagine

Editing an issue on a designated theme comes with all kinds of questions, as one generally thinks of such a special issue as an opportunity to explore and explode the received understanding of that theme. But editing an "open" issue poses questions not only about "openness," but also the act of editing itself. Questions of inclusion, classification, standardization, and authority, questions all linked in some way to the central invitation of openness, pose themselves loudly. For example, why change punctuation to create a cohesive "style" across all of the contributions? Why modify or "correct" the language of non-native English speakers? What even is this task of copyediting? If the ideas gathered here in this journal have been prepared in the name of an open edition, then why not let them come as they are? Why alter their appearance in the name of professionalized standards, especially when one of the stated aims of Performance Philosophy is to question the validity and reliability of those standards? Each of these questions is one we approach in relation to each article and its specific needs, and in dialogue with its (sometimes multiple) authors. The task of the editor, we are finding, is a role we discover by doing it. And we have imagined an opening, we might hope, by making it.

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## Biographies

Prof. Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca is Lector and Head of DAS Graduate School at Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University of the Arts in the Netherlands. Her forthcoming publications include *Interspecies Performance* (2023) co-edited with Flo Fitzgerald-Allsopp; and *On Love and Not Knowing* (2022)—on the work of Fevered Sleep—co-edited with Luke Pell, David Harradine and Sam Butler for Performance Research books.

Will Daddario is a grief worker, performance philosopher, and theatre historiographer. With Matthew Goulsh, he is the author of the forthcoming *Pitch and Revelations: reconfigurations of philosophy, poetry, and reading through the work of Jay Wright*. With his wife, Joanne Zerdy, he runs Inviting Abundance ([invitingabundance.net](http://invitingabundance.net)), which is dedicated to helping people develop creative approaches to grief.

Diana Damian Martin is an artist and researcher. She is currently Senior Lecturer in Performance Arts at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, where she leads the BA (Hons) Experimental Arts and Performance course. Her work has been published in *Global Performance Studies*, *Performance Research*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *Research in Drama Education*. She is editor of the [Margins] section of the *Performance Philosophy* Journal.

Theron Schmidt is an artist, teacher, and writer, currently working at Utrecht University. He is a founding co-convenor of the international Performance Philosophy network and co-editor of this journal, and he is also an Editor of *Global Performance Studies* and Associate Editor of *Performance Research*. In addition to his academic research, he has written widely about contemporary performance and live art for a variety of publications, including magazines and artist books, and also as part of innovative critical writing projects that foster interaction between audiences, artists, and critics. He makes performance as a solo and collaborative artist.

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## HACIA HELSINKI HELSINKI BOUND

### LAGUNARIES

#### Key words: ¿qué hacemos?

Una laguna de libros descansa en el piso, un mar de tarjetas con instrucciones se desparraman y esperan a ser usadas ¿Qué es saber? Dos personas bailan por el espacio ¿Cuál es su archivo? Una se desplaza por el salón invitando a desorganizar la distribución de los cuerpos ¿Cómo se construye un saber colectivo? Hay lugar para el juego, el azar y todos los oráculos.

Al entrar, una sacerdotisa te regala un talismán como guía para atravesar esta *collaborative performance* ¿Qué necesitamos saber del otre para construir un hacer común, un afecto? *How is collective knowledge built?* Unas voces intervienen, invitando a escuchar la respiración ajena, a percibir la textura de la ropa pegada al cuerpo, a recorrer con la lengua cada rincón de la boca. ¿Cómo reinventar las formas de afecto y afectación? Un cuerpo se acerca a otro, abre un poemario (¿qué lengua/qué idioma?) y recita un fragmento en voz baja. Le entrega un papel con una invitación a hacer lo mismo.

Traducciones de traducciones ¿Cómo se construye lo común desde las prácticas artísticas? Una computadora con un documento compartido dispuesto a ser intervenido. ¿Qué repone la presencia? ¿Dónde existimos? Los cuerpos lectores son profetas y escribas. Un acercamiento, un ensamble de prácticas, una composición instantánea de cuerpos que se encuentran en el hacer ¿Cómo construir un saber desde nosotros sin intentar reponer el conocimiento hegemónico impuesto como saber? *How is collective knowledge built? Knowledge is dancing.* Iteraciones sobre intervenciones.

## Key group: ¿Cómo hacemos? ¿Qué es ser un key group?

Las cosas que insisten las llevamos a la práctica, nos damos el tiempo, resonando los temas sobre los que escribimos después. Hacemos teoría conversando.

Pensar con otras, a través de otras, esa es la clave del grupo. Deshilachando las tramas del saber colectivo, trayéndolo acá, a la conversación presente. Despuntando aquellas cosas que insisten sobre los cuerpos, aquellas cosas que insisten fuertes en la experiencia de vivir, que vuelven y vuelve. Aquellas cosas entramadas en los afectos y las vidas de cada una. Dejando de lado la voz erudita del saber aislado y propiciando una voz densa.

Entre, siempre estamos pensando entre otras. Nos iluminamos con linternas y seguimos tejiendo la lana de la otra. Insistir como método, es el título del taller de una amiga, pero le podemos robar la frase porque nos representa y militamos la cita de la compañera, el flujo horizontal de las palabras.

La llave es la clave, abrir la puerta para ir a jugar, salirse por la tangente, rajarse de la academia, todo (o nada) para construir, constituir, componer, ser, hacer una grupalidad. Ser una grupa clave, en cuál clave, un cónclave sin clave

La clave sin llave, no hay puerta pero si juegos que nos permiten siempre salirnos con la nuestra por la tangente, es todo, todo, todo, nunca nada, nada, nada. Reconstruir, instruir, destruir, instituir una grupalidad. Ser clave la grupa, grupalizar la clave, desclavijarse, desclavarse de la pared de la academia que nos permite desclavizarnos en espacios lagunarios de sensaciones.

Prácticas de cuidar, cuidar para ser grupo, para poder tejer. La grupa encuentra un tejido propio para adherirse a otros tejidos anteriores. No vienen por generación espontánea. La grupa se instituye a partir de la insistencia. Insistir hoy, mañana. Insistir hasta formar un encuentro. Hacer pequeños encuentros previos. Jugar e insistir. Tal vez la clave del grupo es que construye sus propias llaves. Arma sus propios tejidos. Se adhiere a otras superficies, lejos de las paredes.

El juego, la cancha, los jugadores, telepatía organizativa, micelio, los limones se van acomodando con el movimiento, genera milagros, sube la vara: querés que todos tus grupos vibren así. Amigas-compañeras, prácticas de cuidado, magia.

Jugadoras de cancha completa, oraculares y fungis, limonas y limadas en movimiento continuo, hacedoras de maravillas, apostando a todas las formas del azar, vibrando vínculos, practicando magia, cuidando los afectos, afectándose en el juego, revolcándose en la cancha, encontrándose en los sueños.

Pasame la pelota que sola no puedo jugar, los limones si es que no tenés una de trapo. La teoría como pelota o limón, pelando las capas de sentidos, mordiendo los gajos ácidos de humor y amor, vibrando en los pensamientos y los sueños. Si nos afectamos, ¿somos más o menos efectivas?

El limón te saca los humos del gas que oprime. Se instala en el paladar de la memoria y salva. Allí, cuando nos gasearon por querer que el mundo sea mundo para todos los mundos, allí el sentido nos salvó y allí seguramente nos unió. No nos vimos, nos percibimos y... hoy: ¿querés un gajo?

Grupo clave, la clave del grupo, nos abrimos y nos cerramos. Abrimos el espacio y conservamos una trastienda.

NO VAMOS A MOSTRARLO TODO, NO VAMOS A DECIRLO TODO, NO PODRÍAMOS, NO SABRÍAMOS CÓMO, LES ABURRIRÍA.

Las magas no comparten los trucos aunque te dejan tirar de los hilos, parte del misterio se susurra, repercute, aparece con las voces bajitas, que traman la magia de lo posible.

Una forma de estar presentes, una forma de manifestar incomodidades, un encuentro entre disciplinas desde el hacer mismo. Este key group es la insistencia en el encuentro. La llave que erotiza pantallas, hace estallar dedos y lenguas virtuales y a veces hasta nos encontramos en carne y hueso en cada lectura en voz alta, en cada cita.

Insistir en los dedos y las voces que erotizan pantallas y cuerpos y textos y lenguas de fuego que se encuentran a viva voz. Una cita con otros, entre otros, virtuales a veces, vibrantes siempre. Hacernos presente desde las incomodidades, a pesar de las incomodidades, con las incomodidades.

Se trata de investigar dinámicas grupales desde un abordaje no psicológico pero terapéutico, se trata de cómo nos ayudamos a vivir, tesoros de la pandemia, amigas en la tormenta, una terapia de sensibilización, la construcción del saber desde el afecto.

Una key para un grupo, darle la llave a un grupo equivale a darle la posibilidad de abrir. El grupo encuentra una llave y abre algo, seguro, mínimo, abre un espacio entre cosas que antes estaban cerradas, obturadas. Para abrir se necesita una clave, siempre la misma o va cambiando. Las claves se actualizan, se renuevan. Hay que ser primero un grupo.

Las llaves en el bolsillo, siempre a mano está la grupa, lista para el juego y la potencia del azar, el entramado de la grupalidad. Si hay algo que hacemos es no parar de abrir, tanto que no nos alcanza la memoria de google drive. Desbordamos de archivos, registros y datos, nunca sobran palabras. La clave de nuestro gmail ahora no la recuerdo, pero seguro alguno de nuestros ministerios está preparado, porque cada parte arma la trama.

Nos damos la llave, la llave la creamos, la imaginamos, la llave que abre el espacio, el juego. La llave a nuestros antepasados, a nuestras biografías. Abrimos los archivos, no para decirlo todo, no para saberlo todo, sino para entrar a la espesura de la trama. Abrirnos. Dar cuenta de nosotras en el hacer/sentir/pensar/decir/callar. Una llave para abrir y también para cerrar. Cerrarnos a un dar cuenta de sí en los términos del otro. Juntar leña en las miradas que nos fijan. Guardar siempre un secreto... para el grupo.

En el fragmento del tiempo, en el susurro de la noche, en el intersticio del grito, en el entre, en lo que ó es tiempo ó es espacio, en lo que no se captura, en... no hay estar, no hay ser, viene para irse, se presenta y desaparece...

# HELSINKI BOUND

## Key words: what do we do?

A *laguna* of books lie on the floor, a sea of instruction cards is scattered, waiting to be used. What is knowing? Two people dance across a space. What is their archive? One moves around the room, inviting us to scramble the distribution of bodies. *¿Cómo se construye el saber colectivo?* There is room for playing, for chance and for every single oracle.

As one enters, a priestess hands out a talisman to guide us through this collaborative performance. What do we need to know about the other in order to build a common doing-together, an affection? *¿Cómo se construye el saber colectivo?* Voices intervene, inviting us to listen to the breathing of the other, to perceive the texture of the clothes clinging to our body, to explore every corner of our mouth with the tongue. How can we reinvent the forms of affection and affectation? One body approaches another, they open a poetry book (in what language/what tongue?) and recite a fragment in a low voice. They hand out a piece of paper with an invitation to do the same.

Translations of translations. How is the common constructed from an artistic practice? A computer with a shared document ready to for interventions. How do we re-place presence? Where do we exist? Reading bodies become prophets and scribes. An approach, an assemblage of practices, an instantaneous composition of bodies that meet each other in the doing. How do we build knowledge from our own selves without attempting to reinstate the hegemonic knowledge imposed as knowing? *¿Cómo se construye el saber colectivo? El conocimiento es una danza.* Iterations upon interventions.

## Key group: How do we do what we do? What does it mean to be a key group?

The things we insist on, we put into practice; we give ourselves time; we resonate with the issues that we later write about. We make theories through conversations.

Thinking with others, through others, that's the key to the group. Unravelling the wefts of collective knowledge, bringing it here, to the present conversation. Unravelling those things insisting on the bodies, those things that insist strongly on the experience of living, that come back and comes back. Those things woven into the affections and lives of each one of us. Leaving aside the erudite voice of isolated knowledge and propitiating a dense voice.

In between, we are always thinking among others. We illuminate each other with lanterns and continue to weave the wool of the other. *Insisting as a method* is the title of a friend's workshop, but we can steal the phrase from her because it represents us and we inhabit the compañera's quote, the horizontal flow of words.

The key/llave is the key/clave, to open the door to play, to go off on a tangent, to run away from the academy, with everything (or nothing) to build, to constitute, to compose, to be, to make a groupness. To be a *grupa* clave, in which key, a conclave without a key.

The key/clave without a key/llave, there is no door but there are games that allow us to always get away with it, to go on a tangent, it is everything, everything, everything, never nothing, nothing, nothing. To rebuild, to instruct, to destroy, to institute a groupness. The *grupa* is key, to group the key, to become undone, to unhook oneself from the wall of Academia that allows us to *unslaven* ourselves in lagunarie spaces of sensations.

Practices of caring, caring in order to be a group, to be able to weave. The *grupa* finds its own fabric to adhere to previous fabrics. They do not appear by spontaneous generation. The *grupa* is instituted through insistence. To insist today, tomorrow. Insist until an encounter happens. Carry out small previous encounters. To play and to insist. Perhaps the key to the group is that it creates its own keys. It builds its own tissues. It sticks to other surfaces, away from the walls.

The game, the pitch, the players, organisational telepathy, mycelium, the lemons find their place in tune with the movement, it generates miracles, it raises the bar: you want all your groups to vibrate like this. Friends-companions, caring practices, magic.

Full-court players, oracular and fungus/*fungis*, she-lemons and *limadas* in continuous movement, she-makers of wonders, betting on all forms of chance, vibrating relationships, practising magic, caring for loved ones and affections, affecting each other in the game, rolling on the court, finding each other in dreams.

Pass me the ball, I can't play alone, or the lemons if you don't have a ragball. Theory as a ball or a lemon, peeling the layers of sense/sensations, biting the sour segments of humour and love, vibrating in thoughts and dreams. If we are affected, are we more or less effective?

Lemons take out the fumes of oppressing gases. It settles in the palate of memory and saves us. There, when they gassed us for wanting the world to be a world for all the worlds, there, the sense saved us and there it probably united us. We didn't see each other, we perceived each other and... today: do you want a slice?

Key group, the key of the group, we open and close ourselves. We open the space and we keep a back room.

WE ARE NOT GOING TO SHOW EVERYTHING, WE ARE NOT GOING TO SAY EVERYTHING, WE COULDN'T, WE WOULDN'T KNOW HOW, IT WOULD BORE YOU.

The she-magicians don't share their tricks although they let you pull the strings, part of the mystery is whispered, it reverberates, it appears with the low voices, which weave the magic of the possible.

A way of being present, a way of manifesting discomfort, an encounter between disciplines from the act itself. This key group is the insistence on the encounter. The key that eroticises screens, makes virtual fingers and tongues explode and sometimes we even find ourselves in the flesh in each reading out loud, in each quotation.

To insist on fingers and voices that eroticise screens and bodies and texts, and tongues of fire that meet out loud. An appointment with others, between others, sometimes virtual, always vibrant. To make ourselves present from the discomfort, despite the discomfort, with the discomfort.

It is about investigating group dynamics from a non-psychological but therapeutic approach, it is about how we help each other live, treasures of the pandemic, friends in the storm, a therapy of sensitisation, the construction of knowledge from affection.

A *llave* for a group, giving a key to a group is the same as giving it the chance to open something. The group finds a key/*llave* and opens something, safe, small, it opens a space between things that were previously closed, blocked. To open something, a key/*clave* is needed, always the same or it changes. Keys/*claves* are updated, renewed. You have to be a group first.

The keys in the pocket, the *grupa* is always at hand, ready for the game and the power of chance, the weaving of groupness. If there is one thing we do, it is to never stop opening, so much so that we run out of memory in google drive. We overflow with files, records and data, there are never too many words. I don't remember the password/*clave* for our gmail, but surely one of our Ministries is ready, because each part makes up the fabric.

We give each other the key, we create the key, we imagine it, the key that opens the space, the game. The key to our ancestors, to our biographies. We open the archives, not to say everything, not to know everything, but to enter the density of the fabric. To open ourselves. To give an account of ourselves in doing/feeling/thinking/saying/silencing. A key to open and also to close. To close ourselves to an account of ourselves in terms of the other. Gathering firewood in the gazes that stare at us. To always keep a secret... for the group.

In the fragment of time, in the whisper of the night, in the interstice of the cry, in the in-between, in what is either time or space, in what is not captured, in... there is no being/*estar*, there is no being/*ser*, it comes to go away, it presents itself and disappears...

## Biographies

**Lagunaries** (b. 2020) is a collective/laboratory for rehearsals in movement. We were not united by love, but by horror: horror of normative pedagogy and disembodied theory. During an online seminar promising an alternative way of looking at theory and contemporary art, but that turned out to be linear and hierarchical, we got together as a collective to rehearse possible iterations of those theories and texts, but using our body, dance and personal genealogies. Our collective has only once met in person and has developed a distinctive series of exercises and mechanisms through which to explore the limits of our personal and collective journeys as artists, archivists, educators, dancers, choreographers, actors, students, and researchers. [lagunaries2020@gmail.com](mailto:lagunaries2020@gmail.com) // [colectivolagunaries.hotglue.me](http://colectivolagunaries.hotglue.me)

**Dami Bacchiddu** was born in Buenos Aires in 1992 and studied visual arts at the Leopoldo Marechal Art School, Musical Education at the Alberto Ginastera Music Conservatory and has a bachelor's degree in arts, a postgraduate degree on Contemporary Artistic Practices and a Diploma on Art and Education from the University of San Martín. Their artistic interests have focused on interdisciplinary and new approaches to printmaking, anthropological theatre and performance, prioritizing activism, educational and artistic approaches to their work.

**María Eugenia Cairo** lives and works in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her artistic training includes an elementary piano teacher qualification, academic and independent studies of contemporary dance and visual arts, and a postgraduate degree in education. Her current research interests focus on artistic practice as a vital practice and on the collective as a way of socializing the vital and circulating affect. She is currently studying a Diploma in Contemporary Art, is a member of Lagunaries and a 24/7 mother. María Eugenia Cairo (Buenos Aires) // [@mariaeugenia\\_cairo](https://www.instagram.com/mariaeugenia_cairo) // FB [María Eugenia Cairo \(Buenos Aires\)](https://www.facebook.com/MariaEugeniaCairo)

**camila kevorkian**. Artist, archivist, researcher and educator based in Mendoza. Since 2011 has been developing her personal practice through contemporary uses of visual archives and their relationship between care and affections and politics of nomadism as pedagogical practice and creative strategy. In 2020 she set up [@trabajopractico](https://www.instagram.com/trabajopractico), eLearning (inter)space on contemporary artistic practices and currently works in collaboration with IC Visual Lab developing "CRITICAL EYE. Visual Archives for Education".

**Belén Martínez Gibilisco** was born in Tucumán, Argentina and works as a theatre director, playwright and actress. She trained at the Faculty of Arts of the Universidad Nacional de Tucumán (UNT), where she obtained her Professor's Diploma in theatre and dramatic interpretation. Her work is oriented to documentary theatre, researching the tensions and limits between reality and fiction. She has worked in community theatre and non-formal artistic education throughout Tucumán since 2009.

**Florencia Mazzadi Historian**, art curator, and advisor in matters of public defense related to justice and race for migrant people in Argentina. Head of Center for Research on Film, Human Rights and Migration, Director of CineMigrante IFF, an annual interdisciplinary work programme, a space of convergence for artists, thinkers, curators, activists, and different organizations of the civil society focused on effecting and setting up dialogues with the society in general, aimed at the reconstruction of collective imageries. // Web: [cinemigrante.org](http://cinemigrante.org) / IG: [@cinemigrante](https://www.instagram.com/cinemigrante) / Fb: [CineMigrante](https://www.facebook.com/CineMigrante)

**Guiomar Peñafort**, an Argentine-latinx artist, received her Professor's Diploma in classical, jazz and contemporary dance in her native province of San Juan and studied cinema and television at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. She has developed a career as a musical theatre actor, dance teacher and audiovisual maker. She moved to Buenos Aires in 2008 where she worked at AFSCA, protecting audiences' communication rights and since 2013 started to incorporate gender perspectives and cultural activism in her cultural practices.

**Martina Prystupa** is a dancer, creator, researcher and educator from Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has a BA in Performing Arts from Universidad Nacional de San Martín. She is particularly interested in movement research through dance improvisation and the relation between the perception of the global body and the environment (space and living matter). She has worked in dance, theatre, cinema and performance productions. As a teacher, she guides practices of conscious physical training and movement research.

**Florencia Pumilla** is an artist, educator and researcher, based in Santa Rosa, La Pampa, since 2009. She has a degree in Engraving and a Specialization in Performance Studies from the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. She is a member of the "Bonus Track" research team investigating drifting as a methodological strategy. She also participates in other collectives and production and research groups in La Pampa, Córdoba and online, including Lagunaries.

**Claudia Ricca** is a researcher, artist, educator and local activist from Buenos Aires. She holds a degree in Anthropology from Trent University, Canada, an MA in Gender and Politics from the University of London and has worked for more than twenty years on environmental and human rights in Europe and Latin America. She has developed her research and artistic practices with other feminist artists and academics from a wide range of disciplines and has published several academic articles since 2017.

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## UNNAMED AUTOFICTIONS, DISSONANT CO-LABOURING: A PREFACE

CO-LABOURING

Autofiction:

I search in my inbox for the word “collaboration”. The results are endless. A staff update informs me that “The Partnerships and Business Engagement Team has launched a new Innovation Seedcorn Funding Scheme with the aim of supporting business and academic collaborations that are innovative and have commercial potential or the ability to grow business networks”. A colleague reminds students that the focus of this week’s session is “collaboration” and that she is sorry she can’t be there with them but that a colleague has kindly agreed to cover for her. A meeting invite suggests we will discuss potential events/collaborations we may want to develop around our chosen theme. A prospective PhD student sends a project proposal and a CV, which includes a list of selected collaborations. A call for proposals invites contributions to a conference which “creates international, multicultural and multidisciplinary platforms for exchange and collaboration between academics, performing artists, arts managers, producers, musicians, designers and teachers”. Collaboration is everywhere; it is productive; it is attractive; it is potentially profitable; it generates exciting public events; it is taught to students; it is listed on CVs.

In what ways do the current systems and ecologies we are embedded within think and weaponise collaboration?

Autofiction:

The students clearly enjoy this opportunity to express their frustration. It threatens me. I lose control of the seminar. The presentation that was supposed to happen doesn't. At one point I ask the students if they think this is my fault. They laugh at me. I tell them it feels that way. They tell me in so many words that it isn't me they are really talking to here and it isn't really me that they care about. They are having this conversation as a group of young people frustrated at the material conditions that face them when they leave university. My attempts to circle back to the assessment, to give them the key terms, to provide them with the ability to critique, are all met with the very embodied difficulty of the problems we are here to discuss.

Are we doing what we are supposed to be doing?

Autofiction:

I listen to Niko G x Kali and think about techno-witches. I raise a complaint for a colleague. I listen to other exhausted colleagues. I am disappointed we did not ballot to strike but committed to try again. I celebrate successes at my friend's branch, where a nearly four-year fight has finally yielded some material changes. I answer more messages about holding workshops at the border. I reassure my grandmother about iodine tablets. I cough. I feel overwhelmed. I open a draft document for an application on commons-building and laugh at my own inability to articulate the value of commons in the framework of a network application. I read my friend's posting about their experience under democratic confederalism in Rojava, "a form of libertarian socialism based on decentralised, stateless governance, gender equality, cooperative labour, ecology and direct democracy" they mention Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan (2017). I open an unfinished chapter for my overdue book and make another note next to criticism and colonial logic. I receive a notification about high air pollution warning. I manage some childcare arrangements for the spring break. I take my child swimming and check on the SEN report. I draw with my child a map of London in the seventeenth century. I read about the case for reparations and antifascism. I sit with writings on strikes and endnotes.

Is this the work?

Addressing co-labouring through anonymous autofiction (our strategy to enable a creative and critical mode more incisive than critique by itself) upends the productive capacity of collaboration. Work stops. This is a methodological Bermuda triangle. We are drawn into a zone where because the work is discussing the work, there is in one way no work. I want to suggest that this is an unintentional feature, not bug, of our process. I am, after all, still writing or talking. You are, after all, still reading or listening. In this moment of communication we might experience the Bermuda triangle of counter-production in a positive sense, as the experience of being somewhere within the walls of a problem, or, physically in the hole of the Bermuda triangle and once we get there we find out it is just a street and some buildings. Things here might look super similar to things back in the non-Bermuda triangle. The difference is that we had the opportunity of divergence. We are in the time of a problem before the sentence has been fully uttered. I am saying that I do not know what happens next.

I have felt it was possible, within reach, to produce what we were being invited to produce—and I propose that this may also have been a shared feeling. So this thing that our contribution is—or will be, or may be—is both elusive and achievable, both unknown (ungraspable) and recognisable (felt). Reading Ann Cvetkovich (2012), we acknowledge the familiarity of what she describes as the “impossible conditions” of academic work, the mismatch between the commitment to intellectual work and the structures that shape it and validate it only insofar as it is identified as productive.

How do I collaborate in this environment?

So, we are stuck—while also knowing how we might feel our way. As a (key) group, we have taken as a starting point that we share an investment in (co-)developing ways of working together that offer something different from critical thought and writing. In a way, the invitation (and our act of accepting it) initiated a process that has been shaped by impasse as much as by activity. Throughout the process, we have felt a shared sense of awkwardness in relation to the task, and discussing this has been part of the work. More intimately, in our own separate ways of working, the task may have provoked feelings of uncertainty, frustration, inadequacy.

What is foregrounded through the provocation of thinking not about collaboration, but co-labouring? Our Key Group began with the provocation of engaging with the politics of co-labouring, and amidst the tumultuous and sometimes disparate experiences framed by the past year, we have come to dwell with the dissonance of intersecting labour structures—structures of thought, structures of collaboration, and institutional structures of relation. Our attention towards the inevitable consequences of collaboration has, in fact, made evident the ways in which the institutionalisation and professionalisation of certain relations and modes of work in the academy and in artistic practice have obscured the assumptions about the kinds of co-labouring we undertake when we do our work, together. What does it mean to co-labour in research, in pedagogy, and in the administrative and managerial interstices of institutional life?

How do we collaborate?

What shifts in the articulation of plurality?

We opt to bring in what is often left out of the picture: the invisible labour that does not make it into conference papers, peer-reviewed articles, grant applications—but without which none of the products that make us who we are seen as would exist. We want to bring in the everyday, the anecdotal, from both the institutional and the domestic sphere. Because while we co-labour to produce a piece of writing, we also run applicants' days at our institutions, book childcare for school half-term breaks, take our pets to the vet, attend compulsory training on changes to assessment boards, have video calls with families overseas. There is no collaborative output that is not entangled with all of this.

In our initial provocation, we spoke about collaboration as a consensual form of working practice shaped by sharing and discovery; the constant forming and un-forming of our Key Group has been entirely shaped by the wildly unpredictable capacities of those we were, and continue to be, in conversation with, thinking alongside. It has also been shaped by our experiences navigating the kinds of forms of invisible labour our institutions often demand without surfacing, and the forms of labour that uphold our lives beyond them. "Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty", says Paul B. Preciado in *ArtForum*, "and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take" (2020). We cannot talk about collaboration without talking about community. And we cannot talk about community without making explicit that which is systemically normalised.

In part, one of the negotiations of forming our Key Group has been undertaking the process of determining our connections and communities, where they intersect and where they diffract. Our Key Group is not only ourselves. Our Performance Philosophy-appointed mentors both asked challenging questions that were again part of the work. The conference planning team informed us that our Key Group work may form the basis for new structures of engagement in Performance Philosophy. Our experimentation is folded into multiple contexts. How to understand the directionality of our dialogue? Will what we say move across, or upwards, or filter anywhere else? We can only imagine further encounters with the poetics of working together. We do not yet know ourselves in this work, because we are aware that the multiple forces that act on our co-labouring will in-effect anonymise our contributions. Sometimes we become institutions the more we listen without responsibility. Because the dissonance of our co-labouring is also the pleasure of kinship.

We have been invited through our capacity as co-convenors, where we organise other researchers to speak to each other and often share none of our own. Our Key Group is a trio of receptors. We are here to hear others. This too becomes a creative problem for us. How can we lead a discussion and listen at the same time? If we do not speak first, will there only be silence? Will that silence be horror or relief? As a Key Group we were asked to come up with a keyword to be used as a nickname for conference planning purposes. We chose co-labouring. The word divides up collaboration into something multiple. It is an ongoing work together without a sense of totality.

What is in fact, held by language?

It is an open time that exceeds the “projected temporality” that Bojana Kunst explains as a mode of collaboration in which the only creative work that can receive funding is that which is already conceivable within the terms of the past. This is a stopper on experimentation (2012). The time of our work spills out past the working day’s nine to five. Our work also started before and will outlast the conference planning activities. The conference committee’s invitation has been to consider our negotiation of the practicalities of working as a Key Group to be part of our presentation. Our Key Group presentation will not be an ending. Our work as a Key Group is a flash point in a practice with a less measurable set of scales. It is clear that our working is our practice.

We were concerned about repeating the tempting errors of “proceduralism”, Bojana Cvejić’s notion that describes the mystification of political action in service of self-reflexivity (2013). In this way we are interested in not-working as a mode of resistance. By not-work we mean the labour that escapes visibility, both in terms of what must be done in addition to the contract as well as the truly creative and critical entanglements that transcend the measuring systems of contemporary knowledge production. Like co-labouring, not-work has the potential to replace the mechanical/digital reproduction of knowledge with equitable relationships of exchange. Still we must not not-work for the sake of resisting the fetishised individualism concealed by collaboration. And yet we are willing to not-work as work if it means the co-labouring becomes a form of survival by means of togetherness. The not-working happens in a context of political action, where colleagues across the country at some universities are on strike. The Performance Philosophy conference planners were curious to hear more about these localised national issues of our work. Our dispassion for procedures is expressed in our unwillingness to make visible the personal politics that too often obscure collective possibilities.

At work, when is a problem between two parties an ending?

What has our collaboration been? Before (after) I can think about this, I want to think about its temporality, its temporalities. Mainly because it feels like an impossible task, but it also feels crucial to the task of making sense of the work in order to make it visible for others—which I sense on some level is (ought to be) the purpose of this text. It began with the invitation to contribute. But that in a way is only a convenient beginning: an abrupt point of departure which needs to be identified in order to make the work exist as nameable, as shareable. Yet the prompt in itself invoked a set of practices that pre-existed the invitation and its acceptance. By identifying us as a Key Group, the invitation alluded to work—group work—that predated it. It acted as a beginning that presupposed the work had already begun. And so we continued and/as we began, in a fashion that both accepted and denied its own point of departure. In a fashion that embraced a messy, non-linear temporality, while also accepting a timeline, a series of deadlines by which work, specific work, had to be produced. Processes of co-labouring always seem to hold these multiple temporalities—the linear, imperative one, and the queer and messy adjacencies.

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## Biography

The Key Group on Co-labouring is made up of Diana Damian Martin, Daniela Perazzo, and Nik Wakefield. They are working group co-convenors in the UK-based Theatre and Performance Research Association.

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## PERFORMATIVITY OF DEATH IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: THE PARTY OF THE DEAD'S GROWING MEMBERSHIP

AGITATSIA

D. FILIPPOVA, A. STEBUR, A. SPIRENKOVA, V. ZAMYSLOVA

Performativity of death is made visible in the rituals, mourning attire, parades and spaces of death and dying. These are human-made performances that protect the threshold that separates those that are living from those that are not. What is beyond that border is a continuation of biological life through the decomposition of human form. After death, there is no performance. The performance collective Party of the Dead challenges this human-made divide, bringing performance—with all its philosophical and corporeal associations of materiality, visibility, politics, action and speech—into the domain of the dead. “Party of the Dead is the largest political party, because its members include all of the dead. Recently, and strangely, some living members have decided to join their ranks,” says Maxim Evstropov, the founding member of the Party (NBC Left Field 2018). Despite the universal connotation of death, there is something deeply specific about the evocation of death in Russia’s post-Soviet context, to which the St. Petersburg-based Party of the Dead speaks.

In the Russian post-Soviet context, there is, on one hand, the obsessive glorification of death on May 9th Victory Day, which occurs annually through the mass mobilization of the incomprehensible numbers of human lives lost into a single affect of sublime glory over (what now appears as the ceaseless) war against fascism, launched from Moscow since 1941; and on the other hand; the total erasure of individual life-death through geopolitical “special operations” that deny the fact of human life loss, routinely abandoning the unclaimed dead bodies of soldiers on foreign territory. While these are old conditions, they have been dramatically enhanced in the present situation.

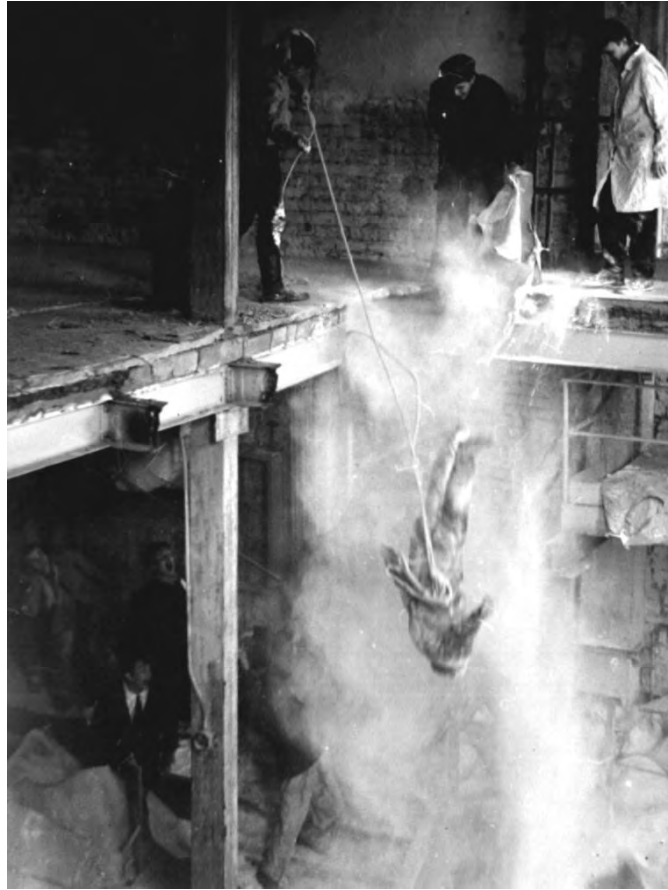
After the beginning of full scale Russian necroperformance throughout the whole territory of Ukraine, it became clear that artists anticipated this “reality” in many ways. Since February 24, 2022, the Russian state has been turning many hundreds of Ukrainian neighborhoods into cemeteries, adding countless members to the Party of the Dead prematurely. With a resurrection of Soviet era-machinery and a bouquet of recycled slogans, the performance of the Russian state in Ukraine exemplifies what Achille Mbembe (2019) calls *necropolitics* in both dictating who must die—exemplified in Bucha—and in creating of *deathworlds* from cities such as Mariupol. The power and the horror of this necroperformance erases the ability to perform the necessary rituals of death: to mourn individual lives, to bury individual bodies, to realize the conventional performativity of death. With unclaimed bodies of soldiers and unknown numbers of individuals buried under tons of rubble on the precipice of extinction, the border between life and death becomes unclear, a life-death.

One of the important slogans of Party of the Dead is “The dead don’t fight.” We—Agitatsia—are a collective dedicated to agitation for the Party of the Dead. With consideration of the precarity of some of our members, we cannot, as a collective, make a statement on the necroperformance here. “The dead don’t fight,” is our statement. The following text is a presentation of important performance-actions by Party of the Dead through the consideration of space, time, body and language. We examine the philosophical implications of conceptualizing performativity of death in relation to these terms.

### Space

Death has a strong association with certain places. Sites of battle, execution and other violence are often reflected in architectural landmarks of the nation state, creating symbolic spaces of power and public memory. At the same time, according to social norms, individual physiological death should be hidden from public space. Hospitals, morgues and cemeteries execute the functions of this removal. There, death is demarcated with special signs, specific materials are provided to hold the remains of the body, and other borders are signified to contain the pollution of death into the spaces of life. Physiological death should not be visible to others, and if it suddenly appears in public space, it is immediately perceived as something unusual, scandalous and abnormal.

This divide was notoriously transgressed in the late-Soviet/post-Soviet period by the Necrorealists, an art movement aimed at engaging with the theme and aesthetic of death and dying in film and performance. The Necrorealists, like other unofficial art groups in the 1970s and 1980s in the USSR, preferred the suburban territories, such as fields and forests, to the visibility and symbolic connotation of urban squares and public spaces for their performances and actions. In the 1990s, the locations became more varied for artists engaging with death: urban territories, where death was either a trigger (Nezeziudik group, *Harakiri Street*, spring 1994; see image 2) or an event (Factory of Found Clothes, *In Memory Poor Liza*, 20 June 1996; see image 3); suburbs (TANATOS, *Chosen Path*, May 1992; see image 4); and specific spaces of death. The first Russian groups to make actions in the cemetery were the Sect of Absolute Love (performances using graves such as *Love Me to Death*, 3 June 1995; see image 5) and the TANATOS group (using the burial site of Kazimir Malevich in Nemchinovka, near Moscow).



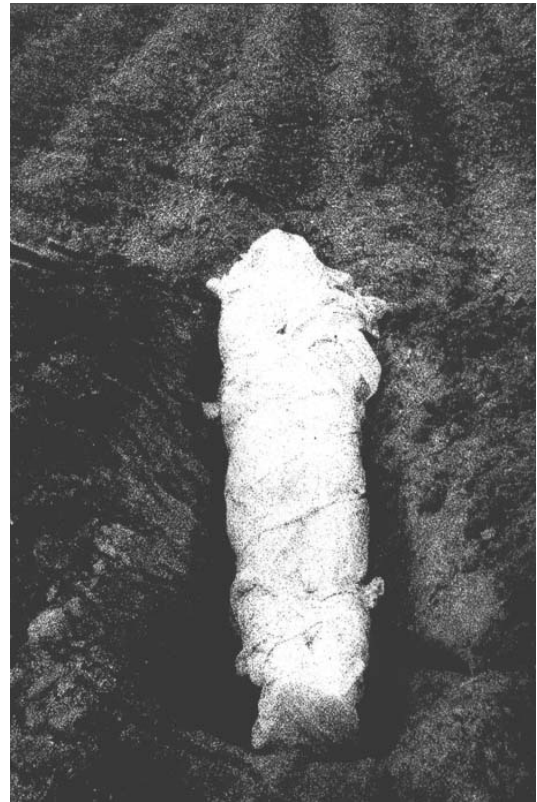
*Image 1: Necrorealists. Dropping the Zurab. Documentation of the preparation of the performance art. St. Petersburg, 1980s.*



*Image 2: Nezeziudik group, Harakiri Street, Moscow, Spring 1994. Photos by Igor Stomakhin.*



*Image 3: Factory of Found Clothes, In Memory Poor Liza, St. Petersburg, 20 June 1996. Photo by Sergey Pantelev.*



*Image 4: TANATOS, Chosen Path, May 1992.*



*Image 5: Sect of Absolute Love, Love Me to Death, 3 June 1995. Photos by Ekaterina Sotnikova.*

Party of the Dead continued with the uncanny exploration, reappropriation, and transgression of the spaces of death of its predecessors. Since its emergence in 2017, the Party has held several performance-actions in city cemeteries. The cemetery serves as a stage, which enhances the highly curated image of the group, as they document their performance-actions and circulate them as images online. On the other hand, the cemetery is also a (relatively) safe space, devoid of the police control omnipresent in public spaces in St. Petersburg during recent years. The not-quite-public quality of the cemetery is not obvious: it is not a closed or forbidden area, but it implies a certain intimacy. Considering that the Russian Actionist movement thrives on direct intervention into public space and the reaction of the passersby and the police, the cemetery is an unconventional choice of space due to the absence of both spectator and police. (In the actions of the 1990s, this lack of visibility was dealt with through invitations, thus creating a small audience and maintaining the “intimate publicity” of the cemetery.) For the Party of the Dead, in contrast, there is no such problem: as it is a party that includes all the dead, therefore the immediate audience and participants are present in the cemetery. Cemeteries—mainly cemeteries within St. Petersburg—are used by the group as specific places for their target audiences—the dead. The “living” get the documentation, as in the case of the *Crosses for noughts* action held in the summer of 2020 at the Krasnenkoe cemetery on the city’s territory (see image 6).



Image 6: Party of the Dead, Crosses for noughts, St. Petersburg, June 2020. Photo by David Frenkel.

## Time

In 2017 Party of the Dead predecessor, group *{rodina}* (motherland), released a 1 min. 42 sec. video titled *Pre-election*, posting it on Facebook. The video shows Maxim Evstropov, the group's founder, dressed in the signature "death style"—corpse paint makeup, a black jacket and a earth green button shirt. He is sitting in a semi-lit room, adorned with tan wallpaper and a plant. Speaking directly to the camera, Evstropov mimics the oratory style of political campaigns in summoning viewers to vote for The Party of the Dead, "because the dead are more than the living. The dead are faster, taller and stronger. 107 billion dead against 7 billion alive," says Evstropov (Party of the Dead 2017).



*Image 7: Party of the Dead, Pre-election video, April 29, 2017. Screenshot by Dasha Filippova.*

In 2018, an online platform NBC Left Field featured a clip from this video in a short documentary about Party of the Dead. The video was titled "Meet Russia's 'Party of the Dead' free-speech activists." As the title implies, the video was narrating the Party's engagement with death through a liberal set of values: symbolic death as the lack of freedom of assembly, symbolic death as the lack of freedom of speech.

The 2017 video and its "western" reincarnation in 2018 open the question of time that animates Party of the Dead's performance. Viewing Party of the Dead through the prism of a lack (of liberal values) places them on a temporality that has been imagined by the victors of the Cold War: the former socialist is always that, which is late on arrival to the "happy" neoliberal present. (The neoliberal present, of course, is not so happy, and is a state of catastrophe without the capacity to imagine a future.) Such a conventional reading erases the complex and looped temporal evocations that death preserves in the post-socialist context. Boris Groys (2008) offers an

alternative reading of post-socialism in relation to time in proposing that: “[t]he post-Communist subject travels the same route as described by the dominant discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history.... [b]ack to historical time” (155).

In its relationship to time, the death in Party of the Dead speaks to this peculiar *loop* in time, where the post-socialist is both the return to pre-revolutionary time and, in some other sense, that what comes after socialism—communist utopia. The temporal progression of life into death become destabilized through the unfulfillment of the teleological progression of socialism into communism. Thinking through the temporality of the loop, one wonders whether we are, as global post-socialist neoliberal subjects, in a sense, dead, or are we not yet born into historical time. Posing as the largest political party, death becomes the stillborn, the undecayed, the buried alive material harbors of dreams that animated the future that had arrived—as time—but not materialized—as historical promise. To the contrast of the desire for freedoms of assembly and speech, the death in Party of the Dead evokes the ghost of the Biocosmist revolutionary promise to conquer time and death, and that utopia would come as the resurrection of those who had died before its advent. They appear now, as members of Party of the Dead, demanding not liberal freedoms, but the justice of time they were promised.

### Body

The body has always been one of the important artistic tools of art-activist practices. The body in public space can become a sign of protest or a gesture of solidarity. Inserting the physical body into the public or contested spaces of the city is a political gesture and an eventful potentiality. At the same time, it is important to note that in the case of Party of the Dead, and more broadly when it comes to the performativity of death, the body acquires a specific ambiguity: it simultaneously acts as an object and a subject, an instrument and an action.

The bodies of Party of the Dead’s members often have this double connotation. They refer to the understanding of the body as a corpse, where the body exists as an object of power through the biopolitical mechanisms. At the same time, in the Party of the Dead’s actions, the body retains its agency, subjectivity and protest activity. This dual understanding of the body can be clearly seen in many of the Party of the Dead’s actions, in which participants take on the role of an animated corpse. For example, the action *We Don’t Say Goodbye, We’ll See You Soon*, which took place in St. Petersburg on the Field of Mars on May 31, 2020, is a gesture in which the body of the artist Maxim Evstropov, wrapped in polyethylene (a material used to dispose of corpses) simply lay motionless in the urban space as an object (see image 8). Later, the artist was arrested for violations of covid restrictions and lockdown, becoming a subject of the law.



*Image 8: Party of the Dead, We Don't Say Goodbye, See You Soon, St. Petersburg, June 2020.  
Photo by David Frenkel.*

Particularly in present-day Russia the bodily presence of the artist in public space creates a force field that has the potential to protest, or at least the potential to resist and disagree. However, in Party of The Dead's action, the immovable body is a corpse—a body that, as a rule, is completely excluded from the urban space, holding no more power to manifest a space of appearance. Corpses are taken to special institutions: the hospital, the morgue, the cemetery. The presence of a corpse in the city—especially during the pandemic, and especially in Russia—makes visible not only the scale of the pandemic, but also exposes the mechanisms of power at the bodily level. As in many cities around the world, the authorities in St. Petersburg banned the farewell of relatives to the deceased. However, Covid restrictions were practically not observed (bars, restaurants, public places were open), and only the city administration strictly controlled the ban on saying goodbye to relatives. Thus, the body as a corpse turns out to be not just an immovable object, but an object of biopower, whose work continues even after death.

This necropolitical component of the Party of the Dead's actions was reflected in the series of action against the war, which the group has been conducting since February 24th. The slogan "Russians do not bury Russians" at one of their cemetery actions shows how the dead body of the military apparatus becomes an inconvenient object, evidence of the war and the defeat of Russia. In his February 26, 2022, post, Evstropov notes: "Mobile crematoria are just destroying the 'biological traces' of the war, solving the problem of huge cemeteries with nameless 'biomaterials.'"

## Language

The Party of the Dead raises an explicit ontological problematic in the simultaneous existence and non-existence of the dead. Evstropov (2020) notes that “the deadmen belong to all these registers at once”. We are aware that the dead don’t speak, at the same time we’re looking at people with masks or “death” make-up to transmit the dead’s message. This ontological paradox is echoed at the level of language. A signature aesthetic of the Party is the use of hand-made posters with statements of the dead speaking in first person, such as “I’m dead” or “We’re dead,” held by living members of the Party. This kind of first-person statement falls out of the conventional system of language, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida (1973, 97). As a matter of fact, not only the dead but *their discourse* is both absent *and* omnipresent. Furthermore the Party enters an ethical plane, seeking to establish justice towards the dead. The use of the first person manifests inclusion. When the Party says “We are dead,” it is certainly “I + you”, i.e. the speaker plus the ordinary citizens who read this sign. Some statements of the Party even demonstrate the fusion of singular and plural in the first person, i.e. by starting with “I/We” (similar to the “I are” and “We am” found by Émile Benveniste [1974]).



Image 10: Party of the Dead, 12 June 2020. The poster inscriptions are: “I/We are dead”, “Which Russian doesn’t feel himself as dead?”, “Russia is a dinosaur”. The inscriptions on the skulls say “I/We”. 12 June is a Russian national holiday which commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

For the pioneer of linguistic pragmatics, J. L. Austin (1975, 60), the performance of a *speech act*, in the case of inscriptions where the speaking subject is absent, can be provided by appending a signature. The signature, in other words, is a substitute for the speaking subject. However, with Party of the Dead we won't find a signature, but the presence of a substitute speaking subject. So how can we be certain that the words uttered really belong to the dead? Therein lies the fundamental difference with ordinary political slogans, which may appropriate the speech of the dead referring to ancestors, fallen veterans, historical figures, victims of repression and past generations—like for example the reference to the ancestors “who passed on to us their ideals and faith in God” found in one 2020 amendment to the Russian constitution. For the Party, the very presence of an individual holding the poster in his or her hands becomes essential for the performance of a real and complete speech act, which paradoxically does not need any signature.

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## ON THE CAESURA IN DANCE: READING *BLACK WATERS* AS HISTORY AT A STANDSTILL

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In the contemporary dance performance *Black Waters* (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020), there is an image of soloist Aaron Chaplin writhing on a heavy rope on the stage floor. He dances on this rope with vast bodily strength and tries to brace himself against its weight. But the rope with which the dancer is chained remains wrapped around his ankles; he cannot free himself and will surrender in the deep blue of the stage light. This is a tableau that attempts to depict the drowning of a commodified man, a historical reference to more than 130 abducted and enslaved Africans thrown off board the British slave ship *Zong* in 1781 (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). “*Look at me and begin to see me*” is the message Chaplin’s solo expresses through his body language in dance. This reveals the narrative dynamic of this piece, which asks its audience to recognise the Black side of British history. Founded in 1981 by three Black British men, Phoenix Dance Theatre stands as one of the UK’s leading contemporary dance companies with an international reputation for socio-politically relevant performances that shed light on underrepresented and untold cultural narratives (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2021). In collaboration with the Kolkata-based dance company Rhythmosaic, *Black Waters* explores the *Zong* massacre and the incarceration of Indian freedom fighters in Kala Pani prison, two historical moments that differ in time and place and are linked by the common fate of being part of Britain’s colonial history (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). Fusing the languages of contemporary dance with classical Indian kathak, co-choreographers Sharon Watson, Shambik Ghose and Dr Mitul Sengupta put constructs of belonging into question to make room for ‘identities for whom home has always remained a contested space’ (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). *Black Waters* premiered in February 2020 in Leeds, West Yorkshire, just weeks before the global lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic forced members of dance companies

around the world into each other's physical absence, just weeks before Breonna Taylor was murdered on 13 March (Gupta 2020), and at the beginning of a year marked by the global anti-racism movement Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd by a White police officer on 25 May (Hill et al. 2020).

With this article, I elucidate dance as an evocative, ephemeral art form that interrogates time, space, and the body as its conditions. I raise the question of the (im)possibilities of representing past events by referring to dance as a form of representation that carries with it the value of memory and provides an ethical impetus for an attitude towards the narrative that contemporary spectators like me, reading through my lens as a White cultural theorist, are confronted with when we see a dance performance like *Black Waters*. As one of many possible answers to this question, I propose a consideration of dance by reading it through the lens of Walter Benjamin's historical thinking on dialectics the dialectics at a standstill. In Benjamin's thoughts on history, we face the events of the present and the imminent future without resort to the comfort of a positively connoted development in what Benjamin sees as an illusory detachment from the past. Remembering where we come from in order to understand where we are in the present is an essential aspect of Benjamin's historical materialism (Benjamin 2015, GS. I. 2, 701). For him, matter persists through time because it becomes part of the present time through remembering and thus plays a role in our thoughts moving towards an assumed future. Benjamin's notion of the past bears resemblance to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's understanding of 'pastness [... as] a position' (Trouillot 1995, 15). Trouillot emphasizes past and present as inherently interlinked: one cannot exist without the other. Pastness, as he understands it, can only exist in memory as seen from the present (Trouillot 1995, 15). Thus, 'in no way can we identify the past as past' (Trouillot 1995, 15). What has been—*das Gewesene* in Benjamin's wording (Benjamin 2015, GS V. 1, 576 N 2a/3)—is to Trouillot a question of how the present thinks of it as past. For him, the past is not a bygone time, since it is renewed by the respective present gaze that looks back and remembers:

It is that renewal that should concern us most, even if in the name of our pasts. The so-called legacies of past horrors—slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust—are possible only because of that renewal. And that renewal occurs only in the present. Thus, even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge. (Trouillot 1995, 151)

White people, when thinking about being human, have the privilege of thinking of their bodily existence in purely biological terms and of considering themselves White only in contrast to other identities, but, as Christina Sharpe writes, Black people are confronted with 'blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection [...] from the realm of the human' (Sharpe 2016, 14). The historical present for Black people is still marked by the afterlife of slavery, which, as Sharpe argues in her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, still fatally affects the way the Black body is socially seen through the White gaze. Sharpe describes Black existence as a state of consciousness that means 'to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved folding' (13–14). This means 'living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of [...] everyday Black existence' (15).

History is not only the narrative presented in history books, but also a temporal sequence of violent acts on institutionally subordinated, marginalised bodies. It is the history of the suffering of Black people, people of colour and Indigenous peoples that is still not sufficiently taken into consideration in European thought. In this context, dance offers a form of representation that makes racial discrimination present again as a historical legacy through the embodiment of the dancer. However, *Black Waters* is more than that. It proposes a turning point in thinking about the Black body. Sharon Watson, Shambik Ghose and Dr Mitul Sengupta's piece engages with histories of Black people and people of colour and, more importantly, reverses a narrative that has always been told in a negative and derogatory way from a White perspective (Watson 2022). Their performance interweaves multiple temporalities within the dancing body by reproducing historical events in their social meaning for a present audience. It is thus irreducibly contemporary because it enacts a reported event as 'appearing-to-belong to "our" time' (Lepecki 2007, 121). The gaze of the present, which according to Trouillot constitutes the past, is addressed by this performance and thus contributes to its decolonial historiography. A dance performance, as a re-enactment of a historical past, can be, if it emerges from a critical reading, 'an act of survival, of keeping alive as passing on' (Schneider 2011, 7), as performance theorist Rebecca Schneider posits:

This keeping alive is not a liveness considered always in advance of death nor in some way after death [...]. Rather, it is more a constant (re)turn of, to, from, and between states in animation [...]. (Ibid.)

This modality of remembering, which emerges from a critical gaze that is never just the present, but always includes the past and the future as a threshold, as in Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (Benjamin 2015, GS, I. 2, 701), denotes 'a critical mode of remaining, as well as a mode of remaining critical' (Schneider 2011, 7). *Black Waters* constitutes a space in which the critical encounter with the past and the transformation of its reading through the present becomes possible.

Choreographer Sharon Watson says of her piece that '*Black Waters* is not about recreating these two events through contemporary dance, but is an exploration of place, worth and belonging, which can often be conflicting for people of colour' (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). *Black Waters* does not render the historical references of its narrative as history on which we look back but represents these references in their emotive power as expressions of colonial crimes both in their past as occurrences and in the aftermath as traces that colonialism has left on societies. Its narrative draws on the experiences of subjugation, torture and murder under British colonial power and weaves them together into a narrative whose effects continue to reverberate in multicultural societies to this day. Black presence is made strikingly visible in this dance performance, which calls for an acknowledgement of the Eurocentric cultural image of Blackness as a yet unreflected White construct that still bears what Shirley Tate describes as 'racist affects' that continue to circulate in the institutional thinking of so-called 'post-race UK' (Tate 2016, 73). In her work on the representation of trauma, or the possibilities of encountering the traumatic event, Griselda Pollock speaks of a

passage from trauma [that] might be understood as the move into the narrativity that institutes time, the pause in which memory forms, hence spatializes. Or

perhaps, we should speak of a passage into the temporality of narrative that encases but also mutes trauma's perpetually haunting force by means of a structuration that is delivered by representation (Pollock 2009, 40).

I would like to think of this understanding of the trauma, which is 'a perpetual present' (Pollock 2009, 40), in the context of *Black Waters* as a transformative re-enactment that transfers the traumatic event as a narrative into the spectators' memory through dance. In this act, an event that has not yet been remembered is passed on. This performance doubles as a process of embodied grief that appears choreographically as a progression from the individual soloing to powerful collective movements. It involves the collective in coming to terms with its history. Watson describes her approach to the choreography as having emerged from a rehearsal room where 'nobody felt excluded because they were able to use their own empowered experience to add to the choreographic,' as Watson remembers the development of the piece (Watson 2022). The dance that is ultimately visible to the audience is the result of a conversation about experiences, history, cultures, perspectives and opinions. 'We carry a lot of trauma physically and sometimes we also carry trauma which is not necessarily overtly represented,' Watson says (Watson 2022). She refers to an embodied experience that her work addresses and that goes far beyond language. Her work revolves around the question of 'understanding what we carry in our bodies' and how this can be emotionally expressed through dance (Watson 2022). In *Black Waters*, too, the empowerment of the narrative emerges from the collective physical encounter with trauma. The choreographers thus develop a narrative form that only the body can tell.

### *Black Waters as crossing*

This performance draws attention to Black identity, both as it is lived and as it is seen through the White gaze. Particularly for the latter, which is made conspicuous in its constructiveness through this performance, *Black Waters* intends a rethinking of Blackness and its place in British culture. Its title translates the Hindi expression *kālā pānī*, a trope that has its roots in ancient Hindu culture and refers to the crossing of the sea (Bates and Carter 2021, 37). Although the term signifies a break 'with an orderly social world' (Mishra 2022, 20), it did not necessarily have a negative connotation, as Bates and Carter point out in their article (Bates and Carter 2021, 53). This changed with British colonial rule, under which the term was used to serve British interests. From the point of view of the British interpretation of forced sea crossing, which was closely linked to the banishment of convicts and thus amounted to social death, the term acquired a new level of meaning 'associated with convict punishment' (46). By the mid-twentieth century, *Kala Pani* became widely known as the name of the Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands (51). This prison, built by the British and completed in 1906, was used by the British colonial masters 'to incarcerate Indian freedom fighters who spoke out against the regime' (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). As a metonym, the term then signified colonial oppression in relation to the Indian freedom struggle, referring to the transportation to Cellular Jail (Bates and Carter 2021, 52).

The experience of being imprisoned in a confined space is illuminated in *Black Waters* by Kieron Johnson's lighting design (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020), which casts narrow squares of light onto

the black stage floor where the dancers, immersed in orange light, dance gestures expressing despair, violence and pain. These gestures take place simultaneously, but not uniformly, which creates the impression of confusion, of being lost in the midst of the dance movements. The dancing bodies appear shadowy and fragmented in their rhythmically erratic movements against a black background. An image of violence is drawn that can be perceived as emotionally painful even without historical background knowledge. In such images, the choreography stages the oppression of Indians by *kala pani* in terms of the experience of dislocation (Bates and Carter 2021, 52), of being torn out of existence as a social individual through isolation in captivity. In the context of colonial subjugation, forcible displacement destroys the sense of belonging and makes the individual disappear behind the racist constructs regarding cultural and ethnic identity. Under this aspect, the term *kala pani* functions as a metonym for a rupture that is 'interwoven with complex shared and individualised transoceanic pasts' (Mohabir 2014, cited in Bates and Carter, 2021, 57). It is this crossing as transformation, in which *kala pani* can be 'evoked as a symbol of remembered pain and servitude' (Amharai 2013, cited in Bates and Carter 2021, 56), that opens up the discursive space in which *Black Waters* is situated.

The choreographers of *Black Waters* make use of this possibility of metonymy by placing the prisoners of the Cellular Jail in a relationship with the victims of the *Zong* massacre about 100 years earlier. The *Zong*, a slave ship captured by the British in 1781, left the African West coast to set out for Jamaica on 18 August of the same year. Although the ship was built to hold no more than approximately 220 captive people, 'the *Zong* sailed with twice that many' (Sharpe 2016, 35). Due to navigational errors, the ship missed its destination of Jamaica. However, the crew did not call at the numerous Caribbean ports along the way to stop and replenish supplies. The *Zong's* logbook reports that, under the pretext of water shortages, the crew decided 'to jettison some of the enslaved in order to "safe the rest of the cargo"' (ibid.). What followed was the calculated murder of 54 women and children thrown overboard on 29 November, followed by another 42 men on 1 December (Lewis 2007, 364). In the next few weeks, more people were thrown overboard, ten of them jumping into the water voluntarily; the total number of drownings was reported to be 142. However, it was not the mass murder of these people that brought the *Zong* case to the attention of a wider public, but the newspaper articles about the subsequent lawsuit in which 'the ship owners (Gregson) were suing the underwriters (Gilbert) for the insurance value of those [...] murdered Africans,' who were considered lost cargo (Sharpe 2016, 35). Insurance claims that treat human individuals as objects whose value can be measured signify acts of dehumanisation and 'are part of what Katherine McKittrick calls the "mathematics of black life", which includes the killability, that throwing overboard' (Sharpe 2016, 35, citing McKittrick 2014).

The assumption that some people are worth less than others underlies all colonialist, racist and anti-Semitic crimes and needs to be actively confronted precisely because it is still embedded in Eurocentric social constructs. I understand these acts of dehumanisation as an abuse of the vulnerability of the individual, reading vulnerability as the kind of relationship Judith Butler describes, a kind of entanglement with the Other (Butler 2016, 25). Butler emphasizes that the persistence of the body 'depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to "be," in the sense of "persist," it must rely on what is outside itself' (Butler 2009, 33). For

Butler, the encounter with the outside world, the 'coming up against' it, is a modality of the body (34).

[I]t is necessary to consider how responsibility must focus not just on the value of this or that life, or on the question of survivability in the abstract but on the sustaining social conditions of life—especially when they fail. (35)

The sense of responsibility for people who do not conform to the existing norms of socially constructed 'likeness' through which we socialise within our communities can possibly be enabled through critical reflection, as Butler posits (36). *Black Waters* offers such a possibility. This performance shows the body in its vulnerability under the White gaze, in its injuries inflicted by White (colonial) powers. It makes it clear that it is the task of contemporary audiences to address this gaze, and that it is the task of White people to self-critically admit that it existed and still exists—and, above all, to learn how to change it.

Trauma as a 'radical and irreducible other of representation' (Pollock 2009, 42) cannot be represented, but it can be transformed through representation, Pollock suggests, as a 'passage away from trauma [...] into memory' (43). *Black Waters* makes clear that 'we are all subject to one another, vulnerable to destruction by the other' (Butler 2009, 43). Through the emotive power of this choreography, which, through the fusion of different cultural dance styles, creates the impression of a cultural exchange against the background of the shared experience of colonialist subjugation and its effects, this performance evokes what Butler calls 'shared precariousness' (43). According to Watson, the choreography was inspired by intercultural relationships and the similarities of experience that come with these crossovers (Watson 2022). The performance brings these shared experiences together to open up a space where cultural identities are explored in both their commonalities and differences. I read *Black Waters* as the kind of 'radical dwelling in and with dehumanization' that Julietta Singh proposes in her concept of dehumanism as 'a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations [...] of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others' (Singh 2018, 174). This performance 'opens us toward forms of cohabitation and being with others that have been lost, suppressed, or have yet to be performed' (ibid.). It unfolds a performative space between the dance ensemble and the audience that has the potential to house a critical discourse through which the human can be read differently, and to begin 'a cohabitation that acts on and through us in order to imagine other forms of political allegiance' (ibid.).

In line with Patricia Mohammed's analysis of the concept of *kala pani*, *Black Waters* is also an attempt 'to move these societies beyond the literalness of any single group's narrative to the melding of the historical experience which of necessity contains both the agony and ecstasy of survival' (Mohammed 2009, cited in Bates and Carter 2021, 56). In this context, the performance functions as a 'counter-memory' (Schneider and Ruprecht 2017, 109) in which an event of the past is not remembered in its social relevance as it happened, but colonial history is re-documented from a decolonial perspective. The Eurocentric silence about this part of history, which is thematised in *Black Waters*, inevitably creates the invisibility of African, Caribbean and Indian

identities. With the expressive images of the performance, which function like puzzle pieces to a larger picture that appears in the context of historical knowledge, the choreographers illustrate the responsibility to inform and critically reflect on the past that lies within each individual. It confronts its audience with a historical counter-narrative that engages with the lived experiences of Black people and people of colour and, moreover, critically addresses the White gaze on the Black body. *Black Waters*, I argue, has the power to change the way we think about this encounter of seeing and being seen.

The performance presents images that emerge as hitherto unseen tableaux from the historical narrative. Aaron Chaplin's solo (described at the beginning of this article) is such an image, as are the above-mentioned dancers in their squares of light. Moments like these have a clear expressive power when it comes to translating emotional meaning into the language of dance. It becomes clear that the intention of the narrative is to evoke emotions and work with them physically (Watson 2022), to let them pass through the dancers' bodies. Other elements of the choreography make use of the rhythmic dynamics of a collective and trace movements that seem to refer to forms of movement that have emerged from collective lived experience. They show that intercultural identities and experiences such as enslavement and displacement create a certain form of bodily engagement with the world and thus produce culture and history. The value that results from this for subsequent generations is made palpable through *Black Waters*.

In this context, I read the rope that binds Chaplin not only as a shackle on the slave ship. In the repetition of the rope within the choreography—in which the dancers rebel against it, slap it on the stage floor, and collectively pull on it—I see a powerful engagement with the history of enslavement and displacement. The emblematic use of the rope is also an exploration of the traces of history in the present, where the rope not only stands for captivity and objectification but also, through its transformation into a recurring symbol, stands for the empowerment of claiming this past as family history and origin, thus representing a connection between generations and cultures that share this history. Benjamin says that the moment the past meets the present, a dialectical image emerges in which one can recognise the interweaving of time levels (Benjamin 2002, 462). I apply this interpretation to *Black Waters*, whose temporality is a simultaneity of represented past and the spectator's present during the ephemeral duration of the dance. However, this moment of a historical standstill is not felt in theory, but through the physicality of the dancers, through their liveliness, their breath, which, as I will explain in the following, becomes tangible through the pauses in their movements.

### The caesura in dance

There is a brief moment when a dancer does not move, a still point between movements. I call it the caesura of the dance. It is the moment when we wait to hear the heartbeat of the dancer, when we listen into their stillness as an unlocatable place from which the dance emerges. The gesticulations of a dancing body are not extinguished in the stillness of their pause but come to a halt in the transition from one dance movement to the next. The caesura, a term derived from the Latin *caedere*, meaning 'to cut' (Merriam-Webster 2022), signifies an interruption. In prosody, it

marks the break in metrical verse, the form-giving pause that brings rhythm into poetry and, through its connection with a speaker's articulation, the vitality of breath. It thus creates the pulse of a work. Caesurae in Benjamin's thinking signify interruptions that force us to pause and evoke contemplation in the reader. In the silence of the caesura, we wait for the return of perceptible matter. This waiting signifies an anticipation of what might come, resulting from the resonance that the intelligible matter of the art form has left reverberating in the viewer's inner imagination before the pause. Interruptions, as a form-giving element, are designated by Benjamin as 'the mother of dialectics' (Weber 2010, 100). From a more Hegelian perspective, the structuring force would be 'attributed to negation' (ibid.), but in Benjamin's thought, interruption is one of the most fundamental procedures of giving form, as Samuel Weber points out.

To Benjamin, referring to poetry, the caesura denotes a necessary interruption of words that marks a clear place within language and makes visible the ideas presented (Benjamin 2015, GS I. 1, 181 - 182). In this pause, a stillness arises, and for Benjamin it is not so much the poet who decides to make the break, but an existence beyond the writer that interrupts poetry (182), whose imperceptible matter calls for space and finds it in the caesura, where it appears to our sensual perception as a silent presence. With this philosophical consideration of the caesura, Benjamin anticipates Jean-François Lyotard, who, with his interest in an artful aspect that eludes full comprehension, makes a similar approach to a particular silent entity that lies outside the work and is inherent in all the arts (Lyotard 1997, 218). For Lyotard, the 'art of the work of art is always a gesture of space-time-matter, the art of the musical score, a gesture of space-time-sound' (217). Similarly, the gesture of dance is a matter of space-time-*body*. According to this reading, the caesura of the dance as an interstice is not exactly in the dancer's body, but somewhere around it and is evoked by it. It haunts me as a spectator. If there is a resonance point in the dance, it unfolds through its caesura.

The choreography of *Black Waters* develops out of stillness. Narratively, this stillness sheds light on the historical silence that this piece addresses. Figuratively speaking, the dance movements develop visually from the black stage background in images whose sequence does not tell a linear story but makes moments and movements visible like tableaux. In the changes between the images, there is space for stillness, which becomes physically palpable in these transitions from one movement to another. There, the encounter with traumatic themes such as enslavement and displacement under colonial rule, which is a physical history, becomes comprehensible through the gesture that emerges through the caesura and helps the ideas presented to become visible. The stillness within the narrative signifies the moment before a voice begins to speak. This beginning, which is only made possible by the caesura, represents for me the significance of this performance: it is the overcoming of silence through which previously unheard voices are given space. It is a memory of Black history that cannot be easily retraced because it is not linear, but riddled with traumatic interruptions (Watson 2022). Making the emotional and physical effort to go there and pay attention to it is an act of recognition of Black voices that *Black Waters* performs. It unfolds in a physical space that expresses what language has not yet been able to convey.

André Lepecki has discussed the still point in dance in his text *Still* and has questioned what can be found there (Lepecki 2000). According to him, 'a tension between still figure and moving image' takes place in this still point, from which the 'dancing body derives expressivity' (342). This aspect of stillness in dance goes beyond its structural function as a pause, as it addresses the 'dance's ghostly other' (340). Stillness appears in the semiotic and physiological caesura of dance and falls, in Lepecki's words, 'outside of the motions and gestures considered as dance proper' (340). If stillness in dance was initially understood as a 'disturbing element,' in modern dance it was interpreted as the origin of dance itself (340). From this point of view, the caesura is the 'dance's invisible, generative matrix' (342). The still point as a caesura marks 'passage into the temporality of narrative' (Pollock 2009, 40) that makes the expressive power of *Black Waters* possible.

The contemplation of the fleetingness in which dance stands still is a reading of opposites that are not sharply delineated. Transience has a structural conditionality of presence and absence of which we become aware in the caesura of forms that marks the threshold where the constituting binaries of matter meet. The dancer, who moves around the boundaries of their corporeality during the performance, emphasizes dialectical epistemes that produce each other. Namely, the vibratile and paralyzation, visibility and invisibility, incorporation and 'excorporation' (Brandstetter 2000, 102) evoked in the (dis)appearance of dance (Lepecki 2016, 129). For dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter, what I refer to as caesurae are 'fissures of movement [...] cut into the memory process – transitional zones, intervals between individual sequences of movement' (Brandstetter 2000, 110). These ephemeral moments strike dance at the core of its (in)tangible form. However, the still point of the body in dance does not mean pure stillness, but layers of microscopic movements, as Lepecki points out (Lepecki 2000, 344). This leads to an experience of 'perceptual thresholds' that draw attention to the body in its stillness (346). This gives us a new perspective on the body itself, which is particularly important in the context of decolonising the ways of how we think of the body. Attention to the subject and its body through stillness addresses 'the problematics of the body's stance regarding the world and regarding the self' (348). In dance, moreover, the subject's encounter with the body extends to the spectator, who becomes aware of the dancer's corporeality. Through this art form, a reflection on bodily identities and their position in society is made possible. Dance offers a possibility of encounter based on the dissemination of embodied knowledge and experience through its inherent physicality.

In his reflection on the role of the spectator in this encounter, Jean-Luc Nancy recognizes in the glance at a dancer the reproduction of the Other in oneself, proposing an Other that in its otherness is another body, that remains at a distance, the one with whom we cannot put ourselves on a par, that reverberates in our thoughts, and that recreates us in our perception of it (Nancy 2017, 41). In the perception of dance, the body is no longer that one body, but refers to a collective bodily experience that passes into our thinking. When we engage with the agency of the dance, we can allow ourselves to be transformed by the performance. I come to the dance unfolding before me with my past, engage with it mentally and physically, and take that experience with me into my future contemplation of the world. In this sense, the encounter with the dance itself is like an interrupting caesura that stimulates consciousness. At the still point we can become aware of the

dancer before us as a human body, staged in their vulnerability when exposed to the gaze of others (Butler 2009, 33). Then, we may perhaps fear for them.

Perhaps the affective potency of stillness derives from our pre-linguistic experience as children. For Siri Hustvedt, the human ability to produce and read narratives is 'rooted in the prelinguistic, sensorimotor, emotionally charged dialogical experiences of timing in infancy and the learned patterns of those early exchanges' (Hustvedt 2018). She points to the fetal experience of sounds and rhythms to explain the human capacity for narrative imagination. This imagination, derived from the memory of the maternal body and the learning of language, leads to sensory thinking in relation to time as rhythmic and space as corporeal. In this context, dance as a form of fiction expressed in body language derives both its genesis and its understanding from the mental images we have gained in our own bodily development. We understand narrative meanings in their similarity to the way our memory patterns emerge (Hustvedt 2018). 'Unlike time,' says Hustvedt, 'rhythm is sensually experienced in the human body; [...] we are subject to rhythms [...] and we also create rhythms' (Hustvedt 2018, 00:08:43–00:10:46). Rhythm creates the beat of a narrative that evokes aliveness through which the embodiment of experience can be formulated in the language of art, as 'rhythm is repetition and remembered repetition creates meaning' (11:00). As children, we begin our encounter with the world not through language but before language, experiencing our first encounters with the movements and sounds of the world through our mother's body. In these pre-linguistic experiences, we absorb information through the body. We observe how others move and can reproduce this in our bodies. Physical movement thus arises in the individual developmental phase from observation and stillness. Pre-linguistic knowledge is embodied knowledge. When we have grown up and learned to speak, we can perhaps find embodied memory only in the experience of music and dance, whose rhythms we experience on a physical level within ourselves.

In the instants of the still body, two forms of memory, the procedural and the anticipatory memory, are reconciled, so that one overlays the other (Brandstetter 2000, 112). By remembering the dance, we reconstruct its movements through our thought patterns, since '[t]here is no mentality without motility,' as Marc Franko points out (Franko 2017, 92). So if contemplative thinking is inevitably linked to continuous pauses that make it possible (Benjamin as cited in Franko 2017, 96), then movement also grips historical thinking or is rather formative for 'how we perceive history to move on stage' (Franko 2017, 93). In this approach to a historical consideration of dance, I follow Benjamin, who was concerned with thinking as a form of movement:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between the dialectical opposites is the greatest. (Benjamin 2002, 475)

Beyond the prosodic effect in works of art, the pause has an important function as a rhythmic condition for physical and mental development. At this point it should be mentioned that in German-language historiography one speaks of a caesura when it is a noteworthy historical

epochal break whose aftermath has significantly changed or will change the future. History presents itself to us through its periodisation as a rhythmic narrative, which we perceive through its interruptions. Pauses that create rhythms thus make us aware of time. If the truth of an event can only be grasped through immersion in the smallest details of an object, as Benjamin assumed (Franko 2017, 96), then contemporary dance, through its form, offers us a view of historical atrocities that enables critical contemplation.

In the encounter between a dancer and their spectator, perception and representation meet at the same moment, emerge from each other and consequently designate that environment which Benjamin called 'body- and image-space' (Benjamin 2015, GS II. 1, 309). Dance, when it is political and socially relevant, is a speaking, writing act in pre-linguistic images that address spectators in their cultural identities. There, in this space, historical and 'political materialism' meets with the bodily existence of the audience (ibid.). Dance catches us in our view of the body. It hits us in its emotional power in our inner experience. The pre-linguistic images that dance evokes thus have a physical effect on the audience, who are immersed in the performance. In the moment of its stillness, dance gives birth to the social as an aspect of perception beyond purely aesthetic enjoyment. It is the moment when the art of dance makes a gesture. Through it, we become aware of ourselves as spectators. This awareness implies an alienation effect in the Brechtian sense, in that we feel disturbed in our usual perception and thus as audience can step out of our immersion in the narrative and critically question our own subjective reality of life through the performed narrative.

I take the question of responsibility towards a social reference presented in the narrative from the concept of attitude, an ethical intention introduced by Brecht in his epic theatre: In its lack of a 'final meaning' (Barthes 1977, 72) in the message of the interrupted narrative presented to us in the performance, the social gesture is dispersed (Brecht 1964, 187). Gestures are within and beyond our perception of the construct of continuous time because they are inscribed in the work and 'make no progress in the course of history' (Lyotard 1997, 218), they 'are neither contents nor forms but the absolutely emotive power of the work' (ibid.). Consequently, gestures can interrupt and alienate the audience's perception of this temporal continuum, but they do not change with what we call progress. It is precisely through this that dance makes possible what philosophy alone cannot: to create a multifaceted place of encounter where the ethical impetus of a work is passed on across temporal and subjective differences.

### Dance in time

In *Black Waters*, we watch the ensemble and see through their movements all the people the dancers themselves are not, but for whose memory they dance. '[T]hey had to go there physically,' says Watson about the work with the dancers in the approach to the narrative, in which the emotional connection of all participants was paramount (Watson 2022). This physical approach to vulnerability through dance evokes emotional responses that we do not get, at least not in this depth, in discursive discussions about race, as history has shown. *Black Waters* offers a story that will grow through the emotional resonance it evokes in the audience. Our gaze always sees 'from

somewhere' (Barthes 1977, 76), that is, from the socio-cultural standpoint from which we make our experiences. The collection of a comprehensive meaning in the social gesture draws its sense directly from the experiences we know as social beings from our cultures. The social relevance of the performance addressed to a critical audience thus extends far beyond the staged meaning into the social implications within audience realities. It needs to be understood by us as an audience in our self-critical consideration of how we have seen the dancing bodies and as a social reference in the way we have interpreted them.

Through their bodies, the remembrance of the victims of the *Zong* massacre and the prisoners in Kala Pani is not only transmitted but actualised within the decolonial thinking of Black presence that becomes visible through the dancers. The representation of these events presented in the choreography is an embodiment of mental relics of the past and thus part of a past world (Franko 2017, 97), which we tend to forget in the present and thus can no longer see the relation of our learned ways of thinking to this past. The collective of the dancers' bodies functions as an archive, a critical theory of dance to which André Lepecki pays attention, emphasizing that 'every carrying of work to an afterlife beyond the work's original limits [...] also reflects back into the original, changing it, forever' (Lepecki 2016, 116). *Black Waters* signifies an act of translation that acts out 'figments of potentiality not expressed' in the original narrative from which it derives (Lepecki 2016, 115). As a source, it is radically incomplete, not only in its conditionality as a work of art (Benjamin 2015, GS IV. 1, 9 - 21), but also in the historical dimension that this dance performance carries.

Part of the choreographic process, Watson told me in our conversation, is working with the dancers' physical reactions as they engage with the (historical) story to be danced (Watson 2022). For her earlier piece *Windrush: Movement of the People* (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2018), she had contemporary witnesses speak to the dancers, as such encounters evoke those emotions that are then translated into movement, she says (Watson 2022). In this process of choreographing, memories relating to lived experiences are passed on to the dancers, and then through the dancers' bodies, which absorb this information, to the audience (Watson 2022). In this way, an archive of memories is created, passed from person to person, that goes deep because it is embodied. Transferred to embodiment in dance, the lived histories are translated into an act of remembrance, i.e., 'carried across' (Lepecki 2016, 115) into every iteration of this performance on stage. In the afterlife of the work, survival is inherent in the memory of veritably lived lives and is passed on to the 'extemporal futurities' (Muñoz 2009, 97) of the performance.

*Black Waters* represents the fragmented identities that emerged from the trauma of commodification and subjugation during colonialism (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). I read this representation of a part of history that is subject to historical oblivion and is made visible through this performance as a form of non-violent resistance through vulnerability, as Judith Butler describes it. For Butler, vulnerability can be mobilised to assert existence, to claim the right to public space and equality (Butler 2016, 26). In this context, '[v]ulnerability can emerge within resistance and direct democracy actions precisely as a deliberate mobilization of bodily exposure' (ibid.). Butler describes this form of vulnerability as resistance in the context of bodily political activism. I want to address the possibility of this vulnerability through the dancer as resistance to

social constructs that are historically conditioned but still there in the discourse of the present. Performances like *Black Waters* can create a resistance to the historical narrative via the vulnerability of the dancer on stage, which as a practice corresponds to a critical line of vision as proposed by Singh in her above-mentioned concept of dehumanism (Singh 2018, 4).

For Gabriele Brandstetter, '[c]horeography is a form of writing along the boundary between presence and no longer being there: an inscription of the memory of that moving body whose presence cannot otherwise be maintained' (Brandstetter 2000, 104). Because choreography is the writing of what is not permanent (namely movement), she proposes that it is a work of remembrance, like a requiem (ibid.). Choreography, according to Brandstetter, operates 'the setting and erasing of memory traces' (ibid.); therefore the body itself evokes mnemonic images that are buried in the individual's memory and come to the surface during the perception of dance (Lepecki 2000, 354). Perception of dance thus moves in two directions: outward to the layers of the bodies as which they are seen in their dance movements, and inward to the layers of memories we remember in watching the dance. This form of memory is always already directed towards the future, is 'movement memory into the future that deletes images and replaces them with others' (Brandstetter 2000, 110).

Dance appears as an art that 'exists as a perpetual vanishing point' and in its form addresses its own disappearance 'in the very act of materializing' (Siegel 1972, 1), as the dance writer Marcia Siegel remarks. In its ephemeral quality, the dance 'disappears into memory' (Phelan 1993, 148) as soon as the dance movement is danced. This assumption points to a subtle difference between the craft of dancing and dance as an art form, which has already disappeared by the time we begin to think about it. For the contemplation of dance, this medium is never present, an assumption that points to the temporal dimension of transience. To think of the dance is to work with its resonance as a consequence of perception, and we give meaning to dance in order to find out what the performance means to us and what we think we know about the presence of the dancer when we remember the dancing body. This flow of variations in the dialectical imagery always distances itself from what it is not, no longer or not yet. As a temporal threshold, dance, in its function as 'evocation between the past and the future' (Brandstetter 2000, 112), carries the past as a form-giving, thought-provoking force into every other constellation of the development of ideas (Benjamin 2015, GS V. 1, 576 N 2a/3).

By understanding the traces in the choreography as mnemonic, the perception of a dance performance marks the standstill of a historical memory that awaits its futures in the reflections of the audience. For Watson, *Black Waters*, as a representation of Black history, is 'just the beginning of how you can unlock something that you can own and you can take all of this as your narrative, as your story. And you give that back in years to come' (Watson 2022). In their ephemeral (dis-)appearance, the dancer marks a passage, a caesura in thought, in which we can take hold of what their dance wants to tell us. The temporal ephemerality of dance indicates that the dancer can be read as a dialectical being in themselves, in whose appearance both the rediscovery of the past and the anticipated arrival of the future coincide, marking the momentum in which movement emerges in the thinking of the body. We have to come to terms with dance as a form of

representation in its Western function as an art form that reaches out to the substances it traces but in which it will never be fully present. Lepecki proposes an 'altogether different understanding of [our] own immanence' (Lepecki 2016, 88), in light of a narrative shift in which the dances of human beings should strive in their movements 'by dancing what humanity is: defective lack, affectionate being, anxious flesh, hysterical animal' (ibid.). This defectiveness, however, signifies the drive of dance as art in its endless search for what it can never be.

By reading dance without deciphering it, we precede the boundaries of language, as dance captures the stories that are too ineffable to be expressed in the language of any other medium, or that are simply not told anywhere else. Dance can never fully represent the subjugation of Black bodies, can never be their suffering and death, but it can express what it means to be Black in a multicultural society, as *Black Waters* shows. The performance opens up a multi-voiced discourse as a different approach to Black pasts. It provides the starting point for an intercultural conversation based on the 'trust that is built through physicality,' as Watson words it (Watson 2022). For me, *Black Waters* is a recognition that marks an act of belated mourning that comes through the resonance of the performance. This collective mourning is important to face the trauma, 'not to fix it but to come to terms with it,' as Watson expresses it (Watson 2022). Through dance, lived realities become visible as an act of resistance against hegemonic structures of (hi)story-telling, passing on what would otherwise be lost. In its enactment, *Black Waters* calls for White viewers to recognise Blackness as a lived identity and to rethink our view through the White gaze in order to decolonise cultural knowledge based on constructed prejudices. For a British audience, it reminds us of how our inner imagination constitutes Britishness and for whom Britain means home (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2020). This performance brings an apparently neglected part of European history to the stage to remind the audience where the socially constructed inequality between Black and people of colour and White people comes from, and to initiate a critical reflection on our own understanding of Blackness and its place in society.

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## Biography

Santhia Velasco Kittlaus gained her master's degree in Critical and Cultural Theory at the University of Leeds. Addressing Walter Benjamin's thinking of dialectics, her research emphasizes the significance of the pause as a form-giving, philosophical element which facilitates thought. Her work elaborates on the encounter with performance as a possibility of critically engaging with socio-cultural constructs.

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PERFORMANCE  
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## EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND THE POLITICAL: PERFORMATIVITY IN THE ART OF JOHN CAGE

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### Introduction

In his book *For the birds*, American artist John Cage (Los Angeles, 1912–New York, 1992) remembers that, during a presentation of *Musicircus* (1967) in Paris, a young man of the audience said to him that if ever he came back to Europe, the young man and his friends *would join him in the revolution*. The adjudication of a political nature to the art of a composer like John Cage might come as a surprise to many. How can an art form based on chance, silence and noise be political? What elements in the art of Cage moved this young man, along with many other members of his generation, to find in it a subversive gesture, a social commentary?

In this text, I am interested in analyzing the relationship between experimental music and the political, understanding this term as the creation and maintenance of human communities, and as the power struggles that take part in all social relations. Specifically, I will highlight the existence of political and ethical concerns in Cage's artwork, discussing how a political message can be conveyed through music, without words, and whether an artistic performance can foster social change. In other words, through an examination of Cage's work, I will address the following questions: Is music a practice to which a political nature may be attributed? Can music contribute to the transformation of society?

To answer these questions I will explore the performative nature of Cage's music. In this article, I will use performativity as a lens of analysis to focus on two aspects of music: a) the capacity that music has to provoke effects on the bodies of its listeners, including their emotions, and b) the "theatrical" quality of music.<sup>1</sup>

A hypothesis that I aim to defend in this text is that addressing these two issues in music allows us to understand the connections between music and other social practices, as well as its critical potential, thus revealing the ties that bind music to the history of the disciplining of the act of listening and, in general, of the disciplining of bodies. Using performativity as a lens of analysis might help us understand music's political effects because, as Alejandro L. Madrid (2009) argues, this perspective implies substituting the question "What does music mean?" for "What does music *do*?" and, even more importantly, "What does music allow people to do?" In this sense, an analysis on music's performative elements attends to the corporeal, contingent and communal aspects of music, instead of its structural and semiotic components. This leads us to conceive music as a material experience that includes both audible and inaudible elements.

For the above, the work of John Cage is ideal because, as we will see, Cage stresses not only the impact that attentive practices of listening and participatory artistic creation can have on our lives, but also the "theatrical" quality of a musical event.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his music would seem to be based upon the recognition (not to mention a vast exploration) of the *performativity* of music, precisely in the two senses that we have already mentioned.

It is well known that in the field of philosophy, English author J. L. Austin introduced the term "performative" to name certain speech acts in which an utterance is used to perform an action, instead of making factual assertions about the world. In his series of lectures, published as *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), Austin proved that there are certain statements that cannot be judged in terms of *true or false*, but need to be judged in terms of their capacity (or incapacity) to produce effects. In other words, Austin coined the term "performative" to name those speech acts that do not describe, report or "constate anything at all," but those in which "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which [...] would not *normally* be described as saying something" (Austin 1962, 5). Although Austin's theory was centered solely in language, his ideas have proved to be applicable to other fields (see Johnson 2014; Schechner 2013; Butler 1990). As French philosopher Jacques Derrida famously argues in his text *Signature, Event, Context* (1972), one of the most interesting aspects of Austin's theory is that it posits an original notion of *communication*. In Derrida's own words:

Austin's notions of illocution and perlocution do not designate the transport or passage of a content of meaning, but in a way the communication of an original movement [...], an operation, and the production of an effect. (Derrida [1972] 1982, 321)

Derrida goes even further, asserting that in the case of the performative, *to communicate* means *to communicate a force*. As Jerade (2020) has shown, it is precisely the concept of *force* that led Derrida to a "productive misreading" ("*una incomprensión (aunque muy productiva)*," Jerade 2020, 153) of

Austin's theory. Whereas Austin links the force of the performative to the *intentions* of the interlocutors and their conscious use of conventions, Derrida traces it to language "iterability": the structural possibility that a speech act has to be repeated, or *quoted*, in different contexts, and the written text's guaranteed capacity to produce meaning even in the absence of its author and its intended addressee. As we will see, Derrida's interpretation on the performative will prove to be useful in this text to analyze John Cage's art (and, ultimately, to reflect on the performativity of music), since both of them reject personal intentionality as the preeminent element from which to study language's or art's capacity to produce effects, emphasizing instead the importance of the repetition and displacement of conventional elements.

Focusing on performance art, and drawing on Austin's and Judith Butler's ideas on the performative and performativity, Erika Fischer-Lichte developed what she coined an *aesthetics of the performative*. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new aesthetics* (2004), she argues that performance art shares two fundamental aspects with performative utterances (and with performativity in the sense used by Butler): it is auto-referential, and it triggers a transformation in the world (be it in the relationship between different people or in the social identity of a person). Following Butler's claim in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Fischer-Lichte posits that the opposite of the notion of *performativity* is *expressivity*.<sup>3</sup> In the case of performance art, this implies understanding art as an *event* open to interaction with the public, instead of as an autonomous and finished *object*, thus highlighting the *materiality* of the experience (linked to the co-presence of the body of the artist and the bodies of the public), instead of its *semiotic* components. In performance art, the central element is the effects, transformations, and social relations that this type of art generates, and not the communicative intentions of the artist or the construction of symbols to be interpreted by the public.

Another idea of Fischer-Lichte about the term performativity worthy of attention here is that it is a notion that has been strategically useful for questioning conceptual binaries inside Western philosophy: Austin used it to question the apparent dichotomy between language and action; Butler used it to challenge the gender and sexual binaries (as well as the dichotomy between nature and culture); and Fischer-Lichte used it to question the categories of traditional Western aesthetics, which include binaries such as *artist/public*, *subject/object*, and even the separation of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Finally, it is important to note that, in the same manner as Derrida, Fischer-Lichte considers that the term *performativity* implies conceiving the effects or transformations produced by something (be it the utterance of a performative statement, a performance art event, or the repetition of certain behaviors that performatively produce identities) as dependent upon a social context. It is this context that confers efficacy to certain actions in order for them to produce changes on the level of social identities and social relations. From this perspective, it is not words, corporeal actions, artistic events, or music that possess in themselves a magical capacity to produce effects, but instead it is their occurrence in a particular context that infuses them with this force—and, at the same time, that explains why certain actions trigger social transformations in some occasions and fail to produce them at other times.

This article aims to explore the critical and political possibilities of music, taking John Cage's art as the object of study, and using performativity as the lens of analysis. In the first section of this paper, I will focus on Cage's ideas on the act of listening. I will link his interests in *silence* and *noise* with his desire to transform our listening habits, a process that he deemed necessary in order for Western civilization to generate a positive relationship with Otherness (and, specifically, with non-human agents and non-Western cultures). I will argue that increasing the importance of silence in music (one of Cage's greatest artistic legacies) implies a destabilization of traditional roles and notions within Western musical experience. The second section of this text will focus on other strategies that Cage used to question Western art, as well as their ontological and aesthetic consequences. In the third part, I will argue that Cage's artistic experiments have political resonances that are in close proximity with his anarchist convictions. I will also argue that Cage's musical events, more than political metaphors, actually produce social situations of an anarchic and egalitarian nature.

In short, with this text, I wish to explore some of the philosophical inquiries that arise from experimental music and *performance art*. How is music, without words, capable of producing and enacting political thought? How does experimental music lead us to imagine other possible worlds?

### I. Listening as a political act

One of the main undertakings of John Cage was the experimentation with new listening practices. On multiple occasions, he stated that, in general terms, his work centered on the desire to *open our ears* (Cage 1961, 10, 117; Cage 1981, 21, 61, 77, 203–204). In sum, he wanted to produce a meditative, corporeal, detached and transpersonal manner of listening, in which our ears could focus on the *activity of sound* in itself, instead of making an effort to try to decipher its meaning (Sevestik 1992; Cage 1961 and 1981; Clarkson 2001; Nyman 1999; Celedón 2016). In this section of the article, I will argue that this alteration should not be taken as an end in itself, but instead as a means to achieve a more significant transformation, namely the modification of the sensorial and conceptual frameworks that we use when dealing with Alterity (i.e. non-human agents, non-Western cultures and oppressed cultures within our own society). In this sense, I think that one of the best descriptions that can be made of John Cage's art is the word "poethic," coined by American writer Joan Retallack to portray Cage's work (Retallack 1996, 173). Accurately, this term manages to denote the existence of a personal artistic style alongside major ethical and political concerns.

It is important to mention that Cage's desire to generate new modes of listening is linked to three concerns: a) his preoccupation with the capacity music has to effectively provoke emotions on its listeners; b) his interest in including noise and silence in music; c) his conception of listening as an *action* that transcends the limits of Western harmony and musical theory. I believe it is possible to connect these concerns with desires of freedom, equality, and justice. The art made by Cage challenges notions that have held an enduring role in the Western musical tradition (as well as in its aesthetics), while seeking to broaden our perception and enjoyment of elements historically left aside.

Like many composers of his generation, John Cage maintained a certain wariness in regards to the capacity that music has to induce emotions in its listeners. He even described that ability as a way of “rousing rabbles” that “seems on the surface human, but [...] animalizes” (Cage 1961, 250). I consider that Cage’s rejection of musical sentimentalism may be taken as a response towards three experiences:

First of all, without a doubt, it is a manifestation of his sustained studies of Zen Buddhism and other Oriental philosophies<sup>4</sup> (see Pritchett 2009; De Visscher 1989; Cage 1990; Kahn 2001). In Cage’s view, these schools of thought teach that emotions and taste are nothing but expressions of a *hardened ego*, which impede the experimentation of the constitutive flow of reality (Pardo 2014). To balance this situation, these philosophies recommend meditational practices that induce a partial oblivion of the ego, a project that Cage explicitly incorporated into his music since the 1950s (Clarkson 2001; Cage 1981, 120; Pardo 2014, 37).

Second, Cage’s position regarding the sentimentality of music is related to his declared failure to provoke in audiences the emotions he intended to produce. As Julia Robinson (2009) has shown, the distance between audience reactions and the composer’s intended emotions in *The Perilous Night* (1944) performance, was a turning point in Cage’s life. Indeed, reflecting on this experience, Cage compares the “whole musical situation” to the Tower of Babel, concluding that “all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves” (Tomkins quoted in Robinson 2009, 66). In other words, for Cage, if emotions are not totally communicable through music, then insisting on musical sentimentality would seem to be pointless.

Third, and finally, I consider that Cage’s reservations regarding the affective agency of music is a response to all that the collective experience of World War II and the emergence of totalitarian states meant to his generation. Although it is true that the vast majority of Cage’s commentaries about the sentimentality of music present explicit connections with Buddhist ideas, I believe that the experience of fascist regimes in Europe, with their notorious use of propagandist music, must not be taken lightly. There are at least three pieces of evidence that serve to prove the validity of this interpretation. First of all, it is important to note that Cage was one of the students of Jewish composer Arnold Schoenberg, who migrated to America escaping the advance of Nazism in Europe. Secondly, Cage composed a piece of music titled *In the Name of the Holocaust* (1942), a wartime tribute to the victims of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Lastly, it is known that Cage wrote a text in which he explicitly links his interest in silence and subtle sounds with the experience of war. In that work, Cage suggests a connection between silence and *eternal truths*, truths that he considered alien to social conflicts:

Half-intellectually and half sentimentally, when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendships. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from *Life*, *Time* and *Coca-Cola*. (Cage quoted in Kahn 2001, 185)

The ideas stated by Cage in this passage suggest a link between the experience of war, his spiritual quest, and his repulsion for what he named a “heavy use of emotions” in music (Retallack 1996, 222). It reveals a desire to generate an art form that shuns the nationalistic grandiloquence of Romantic art, to focus, instead, on the beauty of what is small and quotidian, which he associates with eternal ideals (not to mention divinity itself).

The renouncement of sentimentality is bound to an important conceptual development in John Cage’s work. Instead of assuming art as a medium for expression, he conceives art as a tool for *self-alteration* (“auto-alteración,” in Pardo 2014, 28). This conceptual turn reveals an implicit acknowledgment on behalf of Cage regarding the corporeal agency of music, thus making it possible to propose a connection between his work and *performance art* (see Fischer-Lichte 2004). And although conceiving art as a practice for self-alteration responds primarily to Cage’s spiritual aspiration to unify the conscious and unconscious parts of the self, a project in which he followed Carl Jung and Daisetsu T. Susuki (Clarkson 2001; Kahn 2001), social concerns can also be traced in this conceptualization of art. As Austin Clarkson (2001) and Douglas Kahn (2001) have exposed, Cage believed that only through spiritual transformation could there come about a significant transformation of society.

Cage’s silent pieces are probably the compositions in which his desire to modify sensibility is most explicitly shown. In these compositions, he questions our conceptions of silence, noise, and music, as well as the role that listeners have in the Western tradition (see Clarkson 2001; Kramer 1988, 383–384; De Visscher 1989). To fully understand Cage’s idea of silence it is essential to consider his visit to Harvard University’s anechoic chamber in 1951, an experience that profoundly influenced him. Cage mentions that, far from what could be expected, he heard two sounds inside the anechoic chamber: one had a low frequency and the other a high frequency. After consulting with the operators, he learned that these were sounds generated by his own body: one by his nervous system and the other by the circulation of his blood (Cage 1961).

This experience taught Cage that even in a room designed to be acoustically secluded, we perceive sounds. Furthermore, the visit to the anechoic chamber showed him that it is physiologically impossible for us (humans) to perceive *absolute silence*. This led Cage to conclude that ontological silence does not exist, which for him was equivalent to denying the possibility of *nothingness* and *emptiness* (Cage 1961). Or, put more precisely, it was a way of asserting the *interpenetration* between being and nothingness. Carmen Pardo cleverly states that Cage’s work leads us to conceive and perceive a *sonorous silence* (“silencio sonoro,” in Pardo 2014, 59), an idea that will have important consequences for music.

“4’33” (1952) was composed by Cage as a musical piece intended to share his recent discovery of the inexistence of silence. In this composition, musical silence works as an aperture for ambient sounds. Even though pianist David Tudor premiered the piece, the composition can be performed with any instrumentation. The only instruction that the score provides is that the musician(s) remains in silence during the performance of the piece, allowing the audience to listen to the *non*

*intentional* sounds that emerge in the concert hall (e.g., the coughing of the audience, squeaking of the seats, cars passing nearby, bird songs, raindrops striking the ceiling, etc.).

Although Cage argues that absolute silence does not exist, he does not aim to suppress the conceptual distinction between *silence* and *sound*; he instead proposes to subtly change their habitual meanings. Cage suggests changing the definition of silence from the *absence of sound* to certain *non intentional sounds* (Cage 1961). With this conceptual change he distinguishes *silence* and *sound* in relation to human will. While sounds that are deliberately produced receive the name of “sounds,” those that randomly emerge are classified as “noise” or even as “silence.” Cage’s art highlights that the concept of *silence* does not designate a truly existing sonorous vacuum, but instead refers to sounds that we usually ignore. In this sense, silence is revealed to be not an acoustic phenomenon, but the result of a mental process. Or, in Gustavo Celedón’s words (2016), the silence in Cage’s work is not ontological, but rather *logical*.

Although *4'33"* was composed during a period in which Cage was primarily interested in Oriental religions and in psychological and spiritual transformation, it is possible to interpret this musical piece in an ethical-political perspective. As a composition that aims to induce the audience to listen to silence, it implies a broadening of art to include components that our culture has refused. If to Cage’s notion that silence is not real but rather in the mind we add the argument that conceptual categories are the result of cultural legacy, we may conclude that where *silence* appears it is because a *silencing* has taken place. Following this idea, an art form that proposes listening to silence can be read as an act of justice that strives for a sensorial aperture to elements historically left aside.

The ideal of justice also appears in Cage’s pursuit to create music founded on the inclusion of noise, which dates back to his first compositions for percussion and his pieces for prepared piano in the 1930s. His interest in noise responds to the fact that it transcends the traditional rules of European harmony and musical theory, which Cage considers to be based on a Western Classical dualistic viewpoint<sup>5</sup> which rejects both the sounds emitted by non-human agents as well as the music of other cultures (Cage 1961, 1981; Pardo 2014; Retallack 1996). In his book *Silence*, Cage writes:

If my head is full of harmony, melody, and rhythm, what happens to me when the telephone rings, to my peace and quiet, I mean? And if it was European harmony, melody, and rhythm in my head, what has happened to the history of, say, Javanese music, with respect, that is to say, to my head? (Cage 1961, 42)

This quote serves as a testimony of the links between Cage’s interest in noise and his criticism towards Eurocentrism. It manifests Cage’s acknowledgement of the risks posed by aesthetic principles inherited from the past, which when not critically treated can produce exclusion and silencing.

Contrary to the interpretation I am defending, musicologist Douglas Kahn argues that, as opposed to Cage’s own critical claims, his art accomplishes a silencing of the social that is analogous to the censorship effectuated in the United States during the postwar period. Kahn recalls that Cage’s

oldest project for composing a silent piece appears in a text written in 1948. In that document Cage imagines a piece named *Silent Prayer* that would have a duration of approximately four minutes and a half of sustained silence (Kahn 2001, 169). The most interesting aspect of the imaginary composition is that Cage wanted it to be performed in the broadcastings of Muzak, a pioneer company in the commercialization of background music. Thus, Kahn considers that tracing the origins of Cage's silent music to *Silent Prayer* (1948) highlights a connection between his interest for silence and a desire to *silence the social*.

Kahn's argument is also constructed from the acknowledgment of the existence of some writings in which Cage favors the efforts made by James Petrillo (former president of the American Federation of Musicians) to control the production and broadcasting of recorded music (Kahn 2001, 175). Developing this idea, Kahn suggests that even though Cage managed to attract attention to the unexplored possibilities of listening (which Kahn certainly recognizes as an important accomplishment in an ocular-centric civilization), Cage's conception of listening has a limited perspective, as it does not take into consideration the elements that precisely make it possible for sound to acquire meaning and complexity, and to generate social bonds between people. In other words, Kahn sustains that, more than a sensorial aperture, Cage's pieces effectuate an actual silencing of the social nature of music.

Although I agree with Kahn's appreciation that many of Cage's compositions imply silencing strategies, I find his comparison with the censorship policies followed by the American government during the postwar years to be excessive. The silencing strategies used by Cage are intended to facilitate an aperture to what has historically been denied in the West (particularly natural sounds and non-Western musical traditions). In this sense, more than a silencing of the entire social nature of music, it is a silencing specifically directed at those elements that hinder us from fully listening to Otherness. Both in *Silent Prayer* as in *4'33"*, silence is intended as a medium to intensify our attention to our surroundings, as well as to question our responsibility, as listeners, in the production of the musical experience itself. It is an exploration that is deeply connected to Cage's ecological concerns, which today seem visionary.

Another important aspect that needs to be taken into account is that, in *4'33"*, the silencing is only directed at the pianist (or the musicians that perform the piece) and not the audience, a gesture that implies the suspension of what Jacques Attali (2009) has described as a *monologue* peculiar to Western Classical musical tradition but by no means shared by all other musical cultures. In this sense, the silencing that occurs in *4'33"* can be taken as a counteraction to a previous silencing: a history of the disciplining of bodies that took place in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries (see Fischer-Lichte 2004, 122).

Another feature that I find relevant in Cage's art is that to consider noise as music and silence as sound serves to destabilize those very concepts, thereby manifesting that they are not politically neutral terms. Noise, music and silence are not words that name objective phenomena of a non-historical nature; rather, they denote sounds that a particular culture deems unworthy of attention, and even annoying. In this sense, and using J. L. Austin's terminology, we may affirm that, more

than functioning in utterances that *constate* facts, these words are usually used in performative utterances, with a perlocutionary force. The many times in which the word *noise* has been used to contemptuously refer to the music made by oppressed groups within a society would seem to prove this idea to be true. Thus, the practice of composing pieces in which noise and silence can be enjoyed as music makes evident the contingent and modifiable nature of the notions that we use to evaluate the experience of sound.

The protagonist role that audience members have in *4'33"* is related to Cage's view regarding the act of listening. In the book *A Year From Monday* (1967), he states: "We do our own listening: it is not done to us" (126). This quotation notoriously manifests that, for Cage, listening is a voluntary action, not something that is passively experienced. Consequently, the possibility exists for altering its mode of operation. More importantly, to think of listening as an action stresses its ethical and political nature, since it is an activity for which we possess responsibility. I believe that, for this same reason, Cage shares the idea of English theorist Salomé Voegelin (2010) in that listening is not just a "physiological fact," but "an act of engaging with the world" (3).

## II. Destabilizing the *artist/performer/audience* relationship

As discussed in the previous section, Cage's art constantly asks ontological questions regarding the nature of music and art. Of these questions, one of the most significant is related to the autonomy of an art piece, particularly in terms of the roles that artists and audience have in the generation of an artistic experience. In a vast number of Cage's compositions, both the members of the audience and the performers assume a major creative responsibility, confusing the limits that divide the activities of *composing, performing, and listening*. In Cage's music, listeners are transformed into performers, performers into composers, and the composer into a person who asks questions.

To fully understand the destabilization of roles that takes place in Cage's art, it is essential to be aware of the influence that Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas had on his thinking. From Duchamp, Cage learned that it is not the artist who finishes the work of art, but the people who observe and/or listen to it (Scheffer 1995). In Douglas Kahn's view (2001), this is equivalent to "shifting the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition" (158). In other words, Cage states that the only fundamental element for a musical experience to happen is the existence of a person willing to *listen* to the surroundings.

On the other hand, in his book *For the birds* (1981, 153), Cage notes that Wittgenstein's quote "meaning is use" influenced him greatly. When applied to the realm of art and aesthetics, Wittgenstein's formula implies that the meaning of a work of art is not limited to the meaning that its creator assigned to it, nor to the intentions that the artist had in the moment of its production. Indeed, its meaning equally depends upon the persons that perceive and evaluate the work of art. Thus, it is inadequate to consider the artist as the only creator of the art piece, and the audience/spectators as passive receivers. The application of Wittgenstein's ideas to art entails a

questioning of the classic dichotomy *artist/audience*. The notion of authorship is destabilized, contributing to a more creative role for the audience and performers.

Musician Michael Nyman (1999) states that the production of a more profound commitment and responsibility from listeners and performers is one of John Cage's most important legacies. Nyman (1999) claims that Cage was the inventor of an art movement (*experimental music*<sup>6</sup>) inside Western art tradition, which he opposes to the *Avant-garde* movement of continental Europe. Some of the principal features that Nyman attributes to experimental music are: a) compositions conceived as processes producing *events* rather than objects; b) special emphasis placed on the alteration of perception; c) notations that do not depend upon professional specialization or expertise; d) the avoidance of harmonic climax; and e) the induction of a corporeal mode of listening, versus the capitulation to structural listening promulgated by the European *Avant-garde* music movement.

Nyman links the action-nature of experimental music compositions to a change in how sheet music is understood, thus heightening the performers' creative roles:

Experimental music [...] engages the performer at many stages before, above and beyond those at which he is active in some forms of western music. [...] For while it may be possible to view some experimental scores only as concepts, they are, self-evidently (specific or general), directives for (specific or general) action. (Nyman 1999, 14)

In Cage's view (1967), the exploration of other forms of musical notation responds to his desire to create scores that make *suggestions* to the musicians, instead of giving them *orders*. These notational forms are designed to give place to very different performances of the same piece, diminishing the subordination of performance to composition (Cage 1981, 59–60).

Some of Cage's compositions in which this exploration is notoriously undertaken are *Winter Music* (1957) and *Concert for piano and orchestra* (1957–1958). The first of these consists of twenty unnumbered pages, plus the instructions on how to decipher the composition (Database of Works 2016). These pages can be entirely or partially performed by a variable number of pianists. The musicians decide the total length of the piece. Each of the score's sheets contains various systems of bars; the performers have to decide their order, plus the dynamics and even the velocity of the musical notes.

*Concert for piano and orchestra* consists of 63 pages to be fully or partially performed, in any order, by an orchestra with or without a director. The piece can be taken as a compilation of all the compositional procedures that Cage knew; merely the soloist part for piano was created using 84 different compositional techniques (Database of Works 2016). The musicians determine the length of each of the different systems of the piece, but this can change during its performance, because it depends on the movements of the orchestral director. If using a director, the score requires the director to act as a metronome, simulating with their arms the movements of a clock. Furthermore, the score provides precise instructions about the pace in which the director should move their arms, specifying the differences between the "clock time" (i.e., the time which the director should

take to perform each movement) and the “effective time” (i.e., the position which their arms will be marking, and that the musicians will use as reference for their own performance) (Thomas and Iddon 2017). It is noteworthy that dancer Merce Cunningham acted as the orchestral director in the premiere of this piece, producing, in Cage’s own words, an irregular pace that allowed the musicians to feel free from the “clock time” (Cage 1981, 109).

As we have just seen, *Winter Music* and *Concert for piano and orchestra* share the characteristic of letting performers decide elements that are crucial for the musical experience. Both compositions leave undecided the ensemble, order, length and even the structure of the piece. In these pieces the performers acquire the status of *co-creators*. The open nature of the instructions compels the musicians to decide elements that determine the nature of the piece, whereby they no longer maintain a secondary role, but rather acquire a protagonist role.

Furthermore, the two compositions recently mentioned presuppose an important turn regarding the way in which Western tradition imagines the relationship between composer and music. In his book *For the birds*, Cage recalls that, in the past, music was believed to live in people’s souls and, especially, in composers’ spirits, an idea that was linked to supposing that music emerged when written, that is to say, *before* the music was actually audible (Cage 1981, 77). Instead, Cage’s conception of music may be described as materialistic and realistic. In *indeterminate* compositions (another term that Cage used to denote his music), it is impossible to reckon an imaginary (or internal) listening that precludes the real performance of the pieces, since their nature is determined while being performed. In other words, Cage’s music supposes an ontology radically different from that of Western music composed in past centuries, because performance is constitutive to music itself. Definitive criteria for judging one performance as more accurate, precise or authentic than the others are suppressed.<sup>7</sup> Paraphrasing philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre ([1945] 2007), in Cage’s music *existence precedes essence*.

Austin Clarkson (2001) argues that Cage’s *experimental music* implies a shifting from the *representational* art paradigm, to a *presentational* one. Clarkson suggests a parallel between elements that exist in the musical tradition and the distinction that linguists make between *representational* and *presentational* aspects of language. He argues that music has “translated” presentational aspects of language (intonation, gesture, and emphasis) into historically *sedimented* properties (such as harmony, melody, and rhythm) that can thus be taken as *representational* components within the musical tradition. Instead, Cage’s music prioritizes elements that are “even more elusive” (Clarkson 2001, 67). While in the *representational* paradigm musical meaning emerges from the relationship between a *signifier* and a *referent* (in which musical scores play a fundamental role), in the *presentational* scheme musical meaning depends solely upon the effects it generates.

For Clarkson, a consequence of this is that, in *presentational* modes of music-making, a combination of individual and social meanings is provoked. More importantly, he defends that it is the “unanalyzable quality” of sound in this type of musical events that generates a particular form of communication based on a “communal flow of felt meanings” (Clarkson 2001, 77–78). In other

words, experimental music triggers communal feelings on the basis of a pure shared sensorial experience, making evident the binding force that sound and collective listening practices possess.

The ontological questions regarding music that Cage posed, reviewed in this section, serve as a reminder of the political nature of music. If experimental music is indeed *presentational*, as Clarkson states, both its “essence” (in the sense coined by Sartre) and its meaning are the result of a social event. Experimental music would thus seem to be an excuse for a collective gathering to which transformative possibilities are ascribed. Its function then would seem to be in close relation with ritual; its critical and political possibilities depending both upon the repetition (or, in this case, destabilization) of symbolically charged elements, and upon the importance that sensorial experiences have to produce *a common*.

In the next section, I will comment upon Cage’s pieces in which these presentational aspects acquire a more explicit political nuance. In these pieces, Cage’s experimental tendencies are merged with his anarchist convictions in order to produce events that suppose an ephemeral (but significant) modification of social roles and social relations. Reinserting Alejandro L. Madrid’s approach: What does this anarchic, presentational music allow people to *do* that was not previously possible in the Western classical tradition?

### III. Performing an ideal society

John Cage’s questioning of traditional notions and roles in art cannot be dissociated from political concerns. His artistic experiments can be taken as a manifestation of his desire to promote freedom, cooperation and mutual recognition, three ideals deeply connected with his declared anarchist position (see Cage 1967 and 1998; Montague 1985; Retallack 1996; Sweeney Turner and Cage 1990). It is worthwhile to note that, although ethical and political concerns may be traced throughout all of Cage’s experimental work, these became more explicit starting in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

In *A Year From Monday* (1967, 59), Cage states that the use of social criteria (instead of aesthetic criteria) is more apt in order to evaluate the *contemporary* nature of art. He particularly highlights an artwork’s ability to include (or not) the audience’s actions. This commentary can easily be connected with Cage’s stated rejection of art becoming a “policing activity” (Cage 1967, 147; Retallack 1996), in which some people (namely, artists and critics) dictate to the rest how to behave and feel.

A consequence that derives from this idea is a fading of the boundaries that distinguish aesthetics, ethics and politics, which Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) tags as a particular operation of *performance art* (in which she places John Cage’s work). She argues that *performance art* has a radically different nature from that of Western art produced in past centuries, thus making necessary the creation of new aesthetic categories fit to describe its operations and pursuits. One of the most important of these inflections is that *performance art* aesthetics is based on the concept of “event,” which implies thinking of art far from the old *locus* of inert objects to be contemplated in a reverential manner. Fischer-Lichte defends the idea that *performances* are artistic events with particular characteristics.

The most important for her are: a) the emergence of an “autopoietic feedback loop”, b) the destabilization of binary oppositions (such as *aesthetics/politics*; *artist/audience*; *signifier/signified*), and c) the production of liminal situations that trigger changes in social identities (Fischer-Lichte 2004).

In close proximity with Fischer-Lichte’s ideas, the political turn in Cage’s work coincides with his aspiration to create an art form closer to theatre. One of Cage’s older pieces where we can trace this desire is *Theatre Piece* (1952), appraised by some critics (for example, Alex Ross, Daniel Charles, Patrice Pavis, and Gary Botting) as one of the first *happenings* to ever take place (see Ross 2007; Pavis 1996; Cage 1981). *Theatre Piece* was performed by Cage and his colleagues at Black Mountain College (North Carolina, USA). It was an integration of multiple artistic actions, performed simultaneously and without any script previously decided (Database of Works 2016). An interesting characteristic of the event was the utilization of a non-conventional performative space: the audience was distributed into four triangles of seats that pointed to the center, and the artistic actions were performed around and amongst them (Cage 1981, 165).

The title of the performance (*Theatre Piece*) makes evident the fact that the *Cageian* concept of *theatre* is quite different from the habitual meaning of the word. Cage’s idea of theatre was profoundly influenced by the thoughts of Antonin Artaud, from whom he took the notion of a *multidimensional theatre* and the inspiration to alter the performative space with the intention of completely immersing the audience in the scene (Artaud [1938] 2013; Cage 1981). Influenced by Artaud, Cage imagines theatre as an art form that is closer to *life* than music ever will be. He argues that music is based on an “imaginary separation of hearing from the other senses,” ignoring the vast majority of sensorial stimuli (Cage 1961, 14, 31). Oppositely, he considers theatre as an art form that depends upon a simultaneous operation of the senses, a feature that he recognizes as a continuation of our quotidian behavior.

Jean-Jacques Lebel finds strong political resonances in artistic *happenings*. He argues that wandering freely in the performative space allows participants to be perceived and to perceive others as elements of the artistic event, thereby establishing a *subject/subject* relationship between participants (Lebel 1966). In a similar fashion, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) considers that the alteration of the participants’ identities in *performance art* is related to the creation of communities. Fischer-Lichte indicates that, inasmuch as these communities are based upon a “bodily co-presence,” the limits that distinguish the *public* and *private* spheres are temporarily upset. In *performance art*, the actions made by each person are experienced as a collective event, suggesting the inexistence of clear limits between aesthetics, ethics, and the political (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 40, 51).

Some of Cage’s pieces that possess a notorious performative quality are: *Musicircus* (1967), *33 1/3* (1969), and the orchestral version of *Cheap Imitation* (1972). *Musicircus* was premiered in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, on November 17, 1967. As expressed in the *John Cage Official Website*, it is a piece “For any number of performers willing to perform in the same place at the same time.” In fact, this piece is nothing more than an invitation to any number of musicians (both professional

and amateur) to perform whatever music they want simultaneously. Ideally, the piece should be performed in a large space, in order to allow the musicians to distribute themselves in distant places thereby marking the movements and location of the audience as part of the aesthetic experience. In other words, *Musicircus* is a hybrid between a piece of music, a performance and a soundwalk. In an article published by *The Guardian* newspaper, British composer and musicologist Peter Dickinson remembers some of the instructions that John Cage expressed for a *Musicircus* performance in London in 1972:

- There should be food and drink as at a real circus: ideally all the senses should be employed.
- Use the greatest possible variety of participants—church groups, children's choirs, etc.
- Dancing can be included.
- Since there is no score, no performing fees have to be paid.
- Do not charge admission; no fees are to be paid to participants; use only people who are willing to take part.
- The piece 'should be fun'—people 'should get the joyousness of the anarchic spirit'.
- Don't pay any attention to the discrepancy between, say, a clavichord recital and a jazz band—at one occasion people went along and put their ears to the clavichord!
- Limit the time for a rock group because of the din, but amplification is allowed if the group normally uses it.
- *Musicircus* is a whole evening on its own: five hours would be a 'reasonable' duration.

(Dickinson 2014)

As this quote makes explicit, the instructions that Cage offered transcended the traditional role assumed by composers. His instructions do not only refer to aesthetic aspects (such as what type of participants should be invited, or the possibility of including dancers in the artistic event), but also include explicit indications related to economic aspects and, even, to its political intentions.

On the other hand, *33 1/3* (1969) is an art installation formed by a dozen turntables, speakers, and about 250 LPs, distributed in a room. The intention of this piece is to permit people to manipulate the devices in order to produce an original acoustic experience. It is noteworthy that *33 1/3* counteracts Cage's rejection for musical records, a technology that he accused of converting music (a temporal, lively and social art) into a lifeless object (Cage 1967; Nyman 1999). Lastly, *Cheap Imitation* (1972) is a piece that Cage composed consulting the *I-Ching*. There exist multiple versions of this composition; the one that interests us here is a version for a variable large ensemble, which may have an extension of up to 95 performers. A fascinating component of this orchestral version is that it specifies *not to use* a musical director. In Cage's own view, this makes the piece an arduous challenge for the musicians, impelling them to more attentive listening and to organize themselves in an atypical manner (Cage 1981, 183–184).

Drawing on the ideas of Fischer-Lichte (2004), it is possible to assert that these pieces imply both a destabilization of old dichotomies and a negotiation of participant identities. Participants in *Musicircus* and *33 1/3* are not mere listeners/observers, since their actions produce the artistic event. Following this idea, the two events involve a modification of their status as audience, since their function entails recognizing them as *performers*. Furthermore, these three pieces imply, once again, a subversion of the limits that demarcate aesthetics and politics, because the pieces respond to Cage's desire to produce anarchic situations in which leaderless communities can emerge. Indeed, in these pieces, the participants' actions are spontaneous and unconduted, while promoting cooperation and a sense of community.

Cage's own political view of music is clearly expressed in the following fragment:

I believe that a characteristic that distinguishes music from other arts is that music frequently requires many people. Musical performance is a public occasion, a social occasion. Taking this into account, it is possible to consider the performance of a musical piece as a metaphor of society, a metaphor of the society that we dream of. Although we do not live today in a society that we consider good, we could make a musical piece in which we would like to live. I am not saying this literally, but metaphorically. It is possible to take a musical piece as a representation of a society in which you would like to live. (Cage and Retallack 2012)

Even though I deem Cage's remark as significant regarding the social nature of music, I consider him to be mistaken in conceiving his own music in terms of representation and metaphor. In my own perspective, his art achieves something that is far more radical: it actually fosters the emergence of leaderless communities (though certainly small and contingent). His anarchic pieces are not solely a metaphor of a *desirable society*; they presuppose the creation of new social relations, of a more egalitarian and libertarian nature. Put more assertively: many of Cage's pieces do not simply *represent* a better society, but actually *perform* and materialize this ideal.

## Conclusions

In the introduction to this essay, I pointed out that my intention was to reflect upon music's capacity to convey political messages and to stimulate social transformation. I also presented two hypotheses: 1) studying music using performativity as a lens of analysis may contribute to highlighting its critical possibilities and some operations that usually go unnoticed; and 2) John Cage's work implies a recognition of musical performativity, understanding this term both for its corporeal agency and its "theatrical" (or scenic) quality.

As a result of this attempt to study the performative aspects of Cage's music, I would suggest for further research a more focused application of J. L. Austin's conceptual distinction between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" acts to the realm of music. This would potentially contribute to a better understanding of music's agency over the bodies of its audience, and thus its political functions. Now then, is it even possible to differentiate between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" aspects of music, or are these language categories not suitable for describing the

corporeal agency of music? Even though music is not representational in the manner of certain speech acts, the question remains open as to whether studying the performative aspects of music may reveal analogies between music and language.

One of the most important conclusions we can reach from the arguments presented in this text is that the critical and transformative possibilities of music are deeply connected with an act of quotation (and displacement) of conventions inherited from the past. If it is true that we are able to read political commentaries in Cage's work, it is in great measure due to the appearance of unexpected elements in symbolically charged contexts (e.g., a dancer acting as an orchestral director; a pianist that keeps silent during a solo recital; popular and academic forms of music being simultaneously performed in a circus atmosphere), thus quoting tradition in order to subvert its norms. The most striking aspect of this operation is that it reveals art's codependency with other social practices and areas of thought, blurring the frontiers that separate aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

Perhaps this relation between the critical possibilities of music and the act of quotation may point to future developments for the study of the performativity of music. How can the discussions between philosophers regarding the performative character of language (in particular, the Derrida/Searle discussion on the relationship between the "force" of performative speech acts, social conventions, and the possibility to fully demarcate contexts and personal intentions) be translated and applied to music's corporeal agency, to music's affective force and to the political resonances of questioning its conventions from within?

In this text, I also posited that Cage's music has a political nature because it aims to alter perception and sensibility (with a particular focus on listening), as well as to modify art's conventional social relations. I consider worthy of note that his project of generating other modes of listening is deeply connected to the pursuit of inducing a sensorial aperture to Alterity. Cage's approach to music suggests that art's concepts and practices can generate prejudice, silencing, and exclusion when not treated critically, thus hindering the perception of sounds emitted by non-humans agents and of the richness of the music of other cultures. Following this idea, we can conclude that the political nature of music depends greatly upon its relation with the history of the disciplining of the act of listening. An art that includes noise and silence reveals the manners in which music conditions our perception of sounds, while inducing a reevaluation of the concepts that we use to describe them, and allowing us to find joy in sounds that we previously deemed annoying. In summary: if the pursuit of altering sensitivity has an ethical-political nature it is because, as Cage himself suggests, ethnocentrism is not only expressed in our conceptual frameworks, but also in our sensorial frameworks.

In this article, I have examined the argument that the act of destabilizing binary oppositions is a crucial operation in Cage's art, a characteristic that enables us to place his work both as part of the *performance art* movement (Fischer-Lichte) and as part of the *happening* art form (Lebel). Some of the conceptual oppositions that Cage subverts are: *silence/sound*; *noise/music*; *music/theatre*; *composing/performing/listening*; *artist/audience*; *creator/listener*; *art/politics*; *object/process*;

*quotidian/artistic*. By effecting this conceptual earthquake, Cage's work makes evident that certain notions that seem politically innocent (such as *silence* or *noise*) are not so, in as much as they have a historical nature. Even more importantly: destabilizing binary oppositions allows us to realize that the limits between politics, aesthetics, and art are much less rigid, stable, and clear-cut than what was believed during most of the Modernity. Cage's work notoriously demonstrates that listening is an activity for which we are partially responsible, thus highlighting its political nature.

Finally, another conclusion of this text is that both the political and critical possibilities of music do not depend exclusively upon its capacity to form metaphors, but also upon its potential to perform atypical social relations (e.g. an orchestra organizing itself without the need of a director; attendees assuming themselves as the performers of an experimental musical event; musicians deciding compositional aspects of a piece). My above analysis of Cage's art reveals that if music is indeed political in nature, it is because, as a social activity, it presupposes a collaboration between many persons and a distribution of functions, all of which necessarily encompass relations of power. For the same reason, understanding music solely as a representation or an act of communication fails to fully describe the operations that it actually entails and accomplishes. Understanding the performativity of music helps us apprehend some of these operations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the notion of performativity in music may have at least two other meanings: a) the occurrence of instances of musical experience that auto-referentially define what counts as music, and b) the questioning or challenging of conceptual binaries. Both of these phenomena appear frequently in John Cage's art as is evident in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the misleading separation that the term "theatre" supposes between reality and fiction, and therefore its inefficacy to help us fully grasp what takes place in Cage's art. In this context, I am using "theatrical" simply to highlight the scenic quality of music.

<sup>3</sup> For example, as Butler has argued in the area of gender, the notion of expressivity would imply thinking of gender or sex as essences or interior realities that are expressed through corporeal acts, and not produced by the reiteration of corporeal and discursive acts.

<sup>4</sup> I am aware that the term "Oriental philosophies" is quite ambiguous. If I have decided to use it, it is because Cage himself uses it in his "Autobiographical Statement" (1990). With this term, he particularly addresses Buddhism (both Zen, Chinese and Tibetan), Taoism, the ideas of Indian philosopher Anandas Coomaraswamy and the I Ching.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Cage affirms that European musical theory supposes a division between notes (which exist only in the mind, and thus have an ideal nature) and sounds (which exist in the world, and thus have a physical or corporeal nature). Furthermore, for Cage, the Western classical musical tradition centers its attention on the relationship between notes (intervals and chords) that is regulated in a dialectical logic of moments of tension and relief. As Cage pointed out in many of his writings, even a radical reformer such as his teacher Arnold Schönberg did not abandon this dialectical logic.

<sup>6</sup> It is relevant to point out that the term experimental music was coined by Cage, conceiving it as the triggering of actions with outcomes that are "not foreseen" (Cage 1961, 69). In other words, Cage's concept of the experimental is not defined by the possibility of success or failure, but instead by the indeterminate nature of an event (see Nyman 1999; Cage 1961).

<sup>7</sup> In his book *Silence* (1961), Cage explicitly comments, regarding his pieces *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*: “Value judgments are not in the nature of this work as regards either composition, performance, or listening. [...] A ‘mistake’ is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is” (59). Paradoxically, this idea did not stop Cage from judging certain performances of his music as better (more indeterminate) than others (see Cage 1981; Retallack 1996; Barret 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Although Cage identified the reading of Marshall McLuhan’s and Buckminster Fuller’s texts as the origin of this shift, it is likely that this also had to do with the social effervescence in the United States during the 1960s (particularly the youth movements, the Civil Rights movement, and the United States interventions in Latin American countries). Of these three, the influence of the Civil Rights movement is less explicit in Cage’s writings, although mentions of the need for racial desegregation appear in a few passages in *A Year From Monday* (1967) and *For the birds* (1981). He also collaborated with many Black artists during his lifetime, including dancer Syvilla Fort and experimental jazz player Sun Ra. As for the interest that John Cage felt towards Latin America, I recommend Vaughn Anderson’s text “Revision of the Golden Rule: John Cage, Latin America, and the Poetics of Non-Intervention” (2017). As Anderson makes evident in his article, Cage’s positive reception in Latin American countries as a radical artist had much to do with his explicit repulse against the American military interventions in Latin America during the Cold War era.

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## Biography

Ricardo Lomnitz (1994) is a philosopher, musician and sound artist from Mexico City. He received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, with a thesis about the political implications of John Cage's music. He has composed music for film, dance, and theater productions, including *La Visita* (dir. Clarissa Malheiros, 2022), *Medea* (dir. María Sánchez and Susana Franck, 2021) and *La Peor Señora del Mundo* (Seña y Verbo, Mexican Theater of the Deaf, 2020). As a philosopher, he is interested in analyzing the political nature of music and listening, the eco-musical explorations, the connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics, and performance theory.

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## DRAMA AND DESIRE: THEORISING ENTANGLED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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### Reading Drama with Desire

For philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour (1991, 2013), the splits and divisions of Modernity need to be overcome if we are to make the cultural shift that will be adequate to the challenges of the Anthropocene. To counteract Modernism's disconnect between politics, science, and the arts, Latour calls for a hybrid Gaia-like 'looping' sensitivity that connects thought, feeling, and action. This paper investigates an oblique, yet persistent, connexion between drama and desire, with the aim of formulating just such an ecology of entanglement; one capable of sending what Jacques Rancière terms the 'aesthetic coordinates of perception, thought, and action' into flux, to challenge identity and generate new political subjectivities (2004, 83). The paper suggests that in spite of Lehmann's (2006) post-dramatic move, performance practitioners may find much to value in a systematic understanding of dramatized spaces, charged as they seem to be, with the exchange of libidinal energy we term desire.

It may seem counter-intuitive to be thinking about something as irrational as desire in these difficult times, when our awareness of our geopolitical reality is changing so radically. It is tempting to revert to rationalism, Brecht's theatre for a scientific age for instance, to counter the global

challenges of climate crisis, of war, of pandemic, that face us. But this rational, high-Modern, approach is only half the story. We know the science. What we don't know is why it is so hard for us to act on it. We devalue the more introspective Arts and Humanities—the way we can gain insight into ourselves—at our peril. Latour argues for hybrid projects that allow nature and culture to inform each other. Our desires may be illogical and contradictory, but what is at stake if we disavow them in our performance practices? Does it matter for instance, if an avowedly compassionate researcher documents the impact of her bedside theatre practice for children, by filming them in very poor health in their hospital beds?

The paper will return to the question of bedside theatre to explore the dynamics of cinematic capture in intimate personal space a little later. We will begin by more broadly exploring the visceral and very personal notion of desire, by reading three different accounts of it. First, Aristophanes' satirical myth about sexual desire, as told at Plato's Symposium; then Freud's discussion of primal desire in connection with post-traumatic stress; and latterly the semantic instability that Lacan associates with the term. The paper will focus on the indirect reference each account of desire makes to drama, and then attempt to open up an association between them, to investigate the nature of the oblique connexion.

### Sexual Desire: Plato's symposium

We can certainly sense the presence of Drama, the Greeks' dazzling new art form, as the ancients gathered to discuss desire at Plato's Symposium. Although the explicit function of the Symposium is a discussion of erotic attraction, Plato puts philosophers and thespians together, and the event is in celebration of tragedian Agathon's victory at the Festival of Dionysus. As Freddie Rokem (2010, 22) points out, Plato mixes things up by having comedian Aristophanes philosophise, while philosopher Socrates discusses comedy and tragedy.

Aristophanes' speech takes the form of a satirical myth, which explores how 'the innate desire of human beings for each other started'. He tells how Zeus, jealous of peoples' self-sufficiency, cut humans in half, 'as they cut sorb-apples in half to preserve them'. The result? 'Each of us is a matching half of a human being, because we've been cut in half like flatfish, making two out of one, and each of us is looking for his own matching half' (Plato [385 BCE] 1999, 28–29).

Although Socrates has plenty to say about desire, and his views are well-documented, Plato records his comments about drama less clearly. Socrates' discussion with dramatists Agathon and Aristophanes is postponed until later, when the dancing girls seem to have unleashed people's desires for each other, and everyone is drunk. It is as if Dionysus, breaker of boundaries, and God of theatre, wine, fertility, and madness, ensures the co-presence of the discursive and experiential—much in the spirit of Performance Philosophy. By the end of the symposium most of the revellers were unconscious, except Socrates, who by all accounts could hold his drink. Plato tells the discussion through third party Aristodemus who, half asleep himself, could not remember most of it: 'Socrates was pressing them to agree that the same man should be capable of writing comedy and tragedy, and that anyone who is expert in writing tragedy must also be an expert in writing comedy' (1999, 80).

So, while desire is cogently discussed and recorded at the Symposium by Plato, drama is not. Its quiet presence is contingent on Aristophanes' and Agathon's day-jobs as dramatists, and on Agathon's victory at the Festival of Dionysus. I'd like to draw our attention to the apparent disconnect between the reason for the event (a triumphant performance), and the focus of the event (desire—*specifically* erotic, or sexual desire). Why celebrate a great dramatic performance by discussing sexual attraction? Is there some reciprocity between the experiential and the discursive going on here? Is it because drama and sex are seen as 'performative'? Or have we in some way lost touch with drama's ancient sexiness? Plato's haziness concerning drama at the Symposium frustrates and intrigues. When drama *is* belatedly discussed, and by Socrates the great philosopher of all people, nobody is sober enough to remember much of what he says.

### Primal Desire: Freud on Trauma

We encounter the oblique connexion between drama and desire again in Freud's meditation on shellshock, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ([1919] 2006). Plato's *Symposium* is clearly on Freud's mind as he writes this essay, which explicitly credits Aristophanes with dealing 'with the origins not only of the sexual drive, but also of its most important variation in relation to the object' (Freud 2006, 186). But we are particularly interested here in Freud's concern with a more primal incarnation of desire—that of attachment between baby and mother.

In Section Two of the essay, he specifically deals with the psychic function of plays and playing as a way of circumventing desire's tendency to repeat traumatic experience. Freud observes his young nephew Ernst deal with his mother's upsetting comings-and-goings by playing a game of 'fort-da!' (gone-here!), which involves throwing a cotton reel attached to a piece of string into his curtained cot. Freud notes that Ernst repeats the painful 'fort' part of the game more often than the pleasurable 'da!'. He concludes that the game is not motivated by the happy reunion prized, as we have seen, by comedian Aristophanes, and played to raise laughter in games of 'peekaboo' (Davies 2018). According to Freud, what matters to the playing child is not the mimetic aspect of the game, but that the child exchanges 'his passive role in the actual experience for an active role within the game'. It is at the end of this section of the essay that drama makes a very brief appearance. Freud takes this discussion from playing to plays, extending his argument to encompass the pleasure we take in the 'form of play and imitation practiced by adults [...] for instance in the performance of tragedies'. Just as agency trumps mimesis for the playing child, so Freud seems to suggest, the performance of tragedies plunges adults into a primally imaginative engagement with the play's action; one which takes them beyond repetition into a state of radical creativity '*beyond* the pleasure principle' (Freud 2006, 143). For Freud this primal drive '*beyond*' pleasure was Thanatos. If Eros, the life drive, tends towards cohesion and unity (*da!*), the death drive concerns its opposite: splitting and tragic loss (*fort*). But although tragedy clearly concerns death, we can begin to locate the split between Ernst and his mother as the site of desire, from which the sexual drive, playing, and plays all emerge; a site where autonomy can outweigh mimetic repetition. This is arguably a definition of radical creativity itself, and hardly moribund. Freud's binary life and death drives would seem to be flip sides of the same coin, morphing into their opposites as Freud himself notes antonyms so frequently do in dreams (1997, 202). To set up a more nuanced understanding of entangled performance practice in relation to creativity we will return to the fort-da game a little

later. But we will do so with a Lacanian, rather than a Freudian lens. For Lacan, Freud's life-death binary acquires a tripartite, linguistic complexity; and although Lacan initially sees Thanatos as the child's nostalgia for a pre-Oedipal fusion with the breast, latterly he associates it with the way language stands in for, and replaces, bodies altogether (Hook 2020).

### Language and Desire: Lacan's Graph

Lacan's 1958 article *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Unconscious* (2006) focusses more obviously on the notion of desire that runs through Plato's and Freud's accounts, and less obviously on the ephemeral dramatic connection that specifically interests us here. There are, however, two suggestions that he sees Freud's Plato-inspired writing as dramatic. He introduces his Graph of Desire as having been 'worked out particularly in relation to the structure of jokes' (671), and claims it helps him to 'accurately formulate Freud's dramatism' (676). It is precisely this formulation of drama, the way its action thinks, that we attempt to grasp here. Typically, Lacan skips over the mechanisms that led him to the graph, with the following concise historical overview:

In this formulation, which is mine only in the sense that it conforms as closely as possible to Freud's texts as to the experience they opened up, the crucial term is the signifier, revived from ancient rhetoric by modern linguistics, in a doctrine whose various stages I cannot trace here, but of which the names Ferdinand De Saussure and Roman Jakobson stand for its dawn and its present-day culmination, not forgetting that the pilot science of structuralism in the West has its roots in Russia, where formalism first flourished. (676)

However, from these briefly dropped names, we can grasp that the Graph of Desire is an attempt, made post-war in 1957, to loosen the systemic conservatism of Saussure's binary algorithm of signifier and signified, fixed by a single 'bar'. We can read it as an attempt to account for a new, polysemic, post-structural, approach to communication; one that is open to flux, to positionality, intersubjectivity, and interpretation.

I encourage us here to read Lacan's Graph of Desire as a version of Aristophanes' cut-in-half human flatfish, throwing 'their arms round each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to form a single living thing' (Plato 1999, 28). But Lacan's version also accounts for Freud's nephew's need to displace (*fort*) as well as condense (*da!*); to dwell on autonomy and *autopoiesis*, as well as the pleasure of recognition, in the intersubjective relation. The graph opens up Saussure's fixed 'bar', and Jakobson's looser, cruciform version of the linguistic sign, tipping it on its side, to form an 'X' or chiasmus, showing the desire for social connexion in horizontal as well as vertical flux. Its horizontal axis figures the temporal gymnastics of the 'talking cure', when *a-posteriori* experience is retroactively assigned the *a-priori* signifiers which will allow it to be socially shared. Its vertical axis figures internality and externality in the intersubjective space; psychoanalysts call this transference and counter transference, but we can understand it in terms of the way we project and internalise gaze and voice in relation to the projections and internalisations of the other. The resulting graph shows how time and space affect our perception; gaze and voice, the metonymies of desire, jostle for position in our awareness with its metaphors, words and fantasies. Together

they form a series of boundary-crossing inversions that Lacan uses to understand the dynamics of desire in the consulting room.

Lacan's graph is notorious for its complexity—it is after all a working out of 'Freud's dramatism', his Oedipus Complex. To locate desire, however, we need only concern ourselves with its underlying post-structuralist principle: the destabilization of the 'bar' in Saussure's sign that opens discourse up to analysis. Saussure's algorithm provides one fixed and immutable site of connexion between a signifier and its object where meaning is generated. Saussure likens this to two sides of a sheet of paper; each side is irreducible to, but inseparable from, the other side. Lacan's graph figures a looser connexion, crucially without severing it; so that Aristophanes' desire for union and recognition (*da!*), is held in tension with the agency Ernst acquires when he differentiates himself from his mother (*fort*). Jacques Rancière usefully expands on this state of being 'together-apart' (2008); but for our purposes we can categorise Desire as the term that describes the attractions—and repulsions (see Kristeva 1984)—that take place in the space between the subject, human, and non-human other. Desire is the energetic, multifaceted, exchange of thought and feeling that takes place when we see and are seen, hear and are heard. These active and receptive aspects of gaze and voice are all we need to take from the Graph of Desire, to grasp and use its dynamics in relation to performance. Lacan used them to understand the dynamics of desire in the consulting room; Althusser (2001) used gaze and voice to theorise interpellation and analyse how the Ideological State Apparatus enforced state power; and Foucault used them to grasp how the panopticon gaze subjugated prisoners (1975). We apply these straightforward dynamics of desire—of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard—to analyse the intersubjective (dramatized) space of theatre and performance. What is at stake? Nothing less than insight into the choreography of power in performance; insight that will help us grasp precisely why pointing a camera at a fragile child in their hospital bed and calling it 'compassion' might make us uneasy.

### Democratising Desire: The Theatre of Dionysus

To transfer what we know about the dynamics of desire from the consulting room back to the theatre that arguably spawned them, I want us to consider two boundaries in particular: the visually permeable boundary between the performance space and auditorium (latterly termed the 'fourth wall') and the auditorily permeable Ancient Greek *skene*, which separated the visible stage from the invisible backstage space. Understanding these boundaries could help us understand, with more precision than ever before perhaps, the exchange of libidinal energy that takes place in the dramatized space.

In the street outside the theatre, citizens look and are looked-at, speak and are spoken-to. But once the performance inside the theatre begins, the active and receptive aspect of these interactions is restricted in interesting ways. The auditorium projects the gaze and receives the voice; while the stage projects the voice and receives the gaze. This reciprocal allocation of gaze and voice, the metonymies of desire, draw performer and audience into the dramatized situation in different, yet mutually desirous, ways. Together, like Aristophanes' androgynous humans, stage and auditorium form a 'single living thing'; two spaces conjoined by the shared modalities of a single body. When the post-dramatic stage returns the gaze, or the auditorium the voice, the fourth wall boundary is

ruptured, and the imaginative space of the drama is compromised. But dramatic relationality as we see in Lacan's graph, is an incredibly flexible association; power can shift radically between fictional and civic spaces of stage and auditorium without violating their union. For instance, when the staged voice pauses, is indistinct, or silent, the audience gaze—its super-power—is accentuated; and when the audience gaze is interrupted whenever the play's action moves behind the *skene*, the staged voice—its super-power— gains prominence. According to Jacques Rancière (2004), such disturbances to the 'aesthetic coordinates of perception, thought, and action' (83) generate what he terms a 'democratic' political subjectivity. Intimately held together, yet at the same time held apart, each side of the fourth wall boundary is simultaneously heteronomous (subjected to the other) and autonomous (independent of the other). Although the fictional events taking place onstage can affect all concerned in different ways, nobody loses sight of their imaginary nature.

Before we focus on the other boundary at the Theatre of Dionysus, its *skene*, it is worth paying attention to less egalitarian uses of gaze and voice, to highlight the importance of thinking desire with drama and performance. I am not advocating a slavish return to the dynamics of desire at the Theatre of Dionysus here, so much as a fresh way for contemporary practitioners to appreciate and use its democratic aesthetic. Some performance practices claim to be doing one thing when they are structurally doing the opposite. Compare the carefully balanced power at the Theatre of Dionysus to the practice of bedside theatre. Here actors with puppets seek permission, then 'engage with the child in an intimate one-to-one performance', while both child and actor are recorded on camera 'for the needs of the study' (Sextou 2016, 17). The first thing to note is the boundary violation where the metaphorical space of the performance invades the (already compromised) privacy of a child's hospital bed. In immersive theatre, the fourth wall boundary is frequently blurred or ignored in this way. An example of this is Tim Crouch's play *The Author* (2012), which has no defined stage; instead, two auditoria face each other. Throughout the performance, the play's characters are sitting amongst the audience, and for a long time we are unsure if the stranger next to us is part of the audience or a fictional character. More than the intrusion of personal space, it is this infliction of uncertainty that seems so problematic, especially for children who are already disempowered by illness. The presence of a fourth wall allows us to differentiate between reality and fiction. When performers breach it in this way, they knowingly take control of the boundary, putting their audience in the position of someone suffering from hallucination, unsure what is real and what is not. This manoeuvre, sometimes termed 'gaslighting', can cause us to question our sanity; it compromises the autonomous gaze, the super-power that gives audiences their independence: their capacity to see things for themselves. It is known to cause anxiety and has a disturbingly sadistic edge. It might provide a bit of a masochistic frisson for adult audiences of immersive theatre, but theatre-goers are free to leave anytime they wish. The bedbound child on the other hand, who may be very young, cannot walk away if this immersive 'one-to-one performance' overwhelms them. The balanced power relation, so carefully instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, is subverted in Sextou's practice in favour of performer and researcher because the performer speaks *and* looks. The child is subjected to the desire—the gaze and voice—of the other, as well as the structurally voyeuristic outlying gaze of the camera-operator, and whoever else watches the recordings, for whatever reason.

The much vaunted ‘compassion’ of bedside theatre is brought into question when we consider whose desires it serves structurally, and what those desires might be. The question is surely worth asking of applied performance practices in general, but particularly where audiences are so uniquely vulnerable. By asking whose gaze and whose voice is active, and whose is suppressed, we may reveal democratic, or autocratic uses of desire in any intersubjective space (as Foucault and Althusser suggest). Answers to these simple questions can cut through and expose abusive choreographies of gaze and voice, even when this is vociferously disavowed, and might otherwise escape the vigilance of ethics committees.

To return to the other boundary at the Theatre of Dionysus, we come to the *skene*, a wooden wall that bisected the ancient stage dividing its visible and invisible aspects. The *skene*’s most obvious function was practical: according to John Gould, it created a storeroom offstage for props and a green room for actors (1999, 11). But when the action of the drama is played out offstage, as it was in ancient tragedy, the *skene* interrupts the audience gaze in very interesting ways. Freud deliberately de-centred his patients by positioning his couch so that, if they wanted to see him, they would have to sit up and turn around. When the play’s action moves into the offstage space as it did in the performance of ancient tragedies, like Freud’s patients, audiences are physically destabilised—what they see no longer validates what they hear. Only when we are put in this critically embodied position can the personal and creative work of forging connexions begin (see Katafiasz, 2018). As Lacanian commentator Mladen Dolar notes, vision and audition have conflicting functions:

the logic of vision seems opposed to the logic of audition; [the voice] hits us from the inside [...] if we want to localize it, to establish a safe distance from it, we need to use the visible as a reference. (2006, 78, 79)

If, as Dolar suggests here, we use our eyes to establish a space between self and other, not being able to see makes such differentiation difficult. This can compromise our sense of being separate from the other; like Aristophanes’ archaic human monads; like Freud’s nephew Ernst whose cotton-reel game honours his primal desire to remain connected to his mother. In such moments, it is as if the whole theatre is flying blind, and the other senses, as well as the imagination, are activated. If the fourth wall is doing its job protecting audiences from the staged gaze, when the *skene* collapses the dramatized space in this way, the predicament of the other can affect us personally without overwhelming us physically. It is a far cry from the positionality of the lone child experiencing bedside theatre who is subjected to the gaze of the performer, and beyond that, the camera. When our own gaze is interrupted and distance collapses, privacy from the gaze of the other really matters. The anonymity afforded to us in the auditorium of a theatre allows us the pleasure of suspending our identity, and like the playing child, becoming personally engaged—entangled—in a situation we know to be fictional.

### Desire and the *Skene*

The *skene* at the Theatre of Dionysus seems to be designed to generate the same split in its audience that activates desire for Ernst and Aristophanes; the same division Freud deliberately

conjured in the geography of his consulting room; the heightened sensitivity to the other called for by Latour to politicise subjectivity in the Anthropocene, perhaps. If performance practitioners want to understand and use space that is charged with desire in this way, space that splits yet entangles, it may be helpful to look at the *skene* more closely.

One of the great conceptual leaps made by Lacan was his rapprochement between psychoanalysis and linguistics. As we have seen, his Graph of Desire loosens the bar in Saussure's linguistic sign to figure signifiers and objects in time and space: identity in flux. The bar in Saussure's sign operates much as the *skene* and fourth wall do: it unifies, and separates, things that are inseparable, yet irreducible. Such as the fictional world onstage and the social realities of the auditorium; the auditorial gaze and staged voice; eye and ear of each member of the audience. Inseparable yet irreducible, too, are Aristophanes' desirous sexual partners; Freud's anxious nephew and his disappearing mother. We can make more precise sense of this desirous relationality if we read it as Lacan did, by associating the psyche with the sign.

According to linguist Charles Peirce, there are three types of signifier. The 'bar' in Saussure's sign mediates the relationship between the signifier and its referent differently in each case; much as I suggest, the *skene* and fourth wall mediate each of the three spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus differently. Like the painted side of the *skene*, iconic signifiers resemble their objects mimetically. The words spoken by actors are symbolic signifiers, whose arbitrary rules we learn and internalise, in place of objects. Indexical signifiers operate differently because they indicate or point directly across time and space at their lost objects; for instance, an object may become personally valuable to us because it was once owned by a deceased relative. The obscene backstage space at the Theatre of Dionysus operates indexically because the *skene* indicates the presence of things we cannot see. We can begin to locate indices with the desirous, entangled, obscene space that interests us here.

Lacan linked Peirce's three signs to Freud's topology of *ego*, *super-ego*, and *id*, because (like icon, symbol, and index) they operate using reflection, laws or conventions, and bodies respectively. Lacan took Freud's topology and paired it with Peirce's linguistic insight to create the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, the psycho-linguistic 'registers' that form his version of the Oedipus Complex; the unique combination of early experiences that according to Freud, shape each human identity. As the child separates out psychologically from care-givers, they move from a world of contiguities in the Real, into one of picture-book semblances in the Imaginary, and eventually, speech in the Symbolic. It is interesting that the only trace of drama in the psychoanalytic lexicon is 'Oedipus'. But it is very tempting to suggest that Freud modelled his topology of the psyche directly upon the three carefully curated spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus.

Sophocles' cocksure King Oedipus was Freud's template for this complex, presumably because the character's *ego* and *super-ego* were so spectacularly dissociated from his *id*. In the Symbolic register of the *super-ego*, Oedipus is King of Thebes; in the Imaginary register (in his own *egoic* estimation) he is the hero who saved the city from the plague. His painful feet in the register of the Real cut through these cultural and personal misconceptions because they indicate the corporeal truth of

his situation. Oedipus' feet indicate the birth parents who nailed them to the rocks at Mount Kithairon when he was newly born, and left him to die; the parents Oedipus has unknowingly murdered and married. For Aristotle, the disconnect between thought, feeling, and action (between *ego*, *super-ego*, and *id*) gave rise to *hubris*, *hamartia* and *anagnorisis*; the arrogance, mistakes, and painful recognitions that dismantled the identity of the hero and formed the Aristotelian paradigm for tragedy. For Freud however, (as for Sophocles' chorus), Oedipus was a paradigm for the whole of humanity. As Oedipus shifts from fictional character to psychological complex, the drama of his situation frequently gets eclipsed; perhaps because psychoanalysis acknowledges its dramatic origins in name only. Here we attempt to hang onto and rehabilitate the performative implications of the Freudian move. If Oedipus is not just a dramatic character, but a paradigm for the tragedy of *all* character-formation, then the political function of the drama becomes clear: it dismantles the cultural and personal misconceptions of *super-ego* and *ego* to expose the physical reality of our situation: the underlying desire of the *id* we disavow. Freud's dramatism is surely badly needed in the Anthropocene. It takes us beyond Aristotle and suggests that drama can potentially send the subjectivities of its entire audiences into flux, not just its protagonists.

I propose we can understand how drama does this by reading the three spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus through Lacan's psycholinguistic registers to suggest an analogy between sign, psyche, and stage. The painted side of the *skene*, in front of which audiences gaze and actors speak, operates predominately in Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic registers. Our particular interest here is in the temporal inflection of each register. Icons and symbols are composed of culturally determined patterns that exist 'always already', *a-priori* of us. They are the logocentric systems or ideological misconceptions that perform on us when society identifies and enculturates our bodies. Icons and symbols show us how thought performs.

But when the dramatic action moves beyond the *skene*, as it does when Oedipus goes inside the palace to confront his wife-mother, events are indistinct; as Dolar notes, sound 'hits us from the inside' (2006, 78). Without the gaze to distance us, the drama's fictional events get under our skin; triggering the primal anxiety (the fear Aristotle associates with tragedy, perhaps) that we experience when we hear an inchoate sound—a squeak or a rattle—and cannot rest until we have identified it. So, when we hear Agamemnon's death cries from behind the *skene*, or we see a character moving under a blanket, or hiding under floorboards in one of Edward Bond's plays for young people, we may become more intensely engaged in the action. Such drama deploys Lacan's corporeal register of the Real. In Greek tragedy a Messenger emerges from the palace to put the horrific events we have witnessed *a-posteriori* into words, the *a-priori* structures that can be socially shared. It is important not to confuse the Real with the literal as docudrama seems to do. The Real engages us physically because its temporal inflection is different from the other two registers; indices do not associate retroactively with their objects formally, or intellectually, as icons and symbols do; instead there is a direct, physical connection between signifier and signified that, like Oedipus' feet, is sensorially felt if not yet consciously understood. Drama can draw us into the corporeal logic of its fictional situation when meaning has to be personally put together or created by its audience, *a-posteriori*.

Indices point unequivocally at ‘this or that existing thing’, and they do so with urgency, directing ‘the attention to their objects by blind compulsion’ (Pierce cited in Chandler 2000, 41–2). Perhaps indices induce this psychic anxiety because they prevent eye and ear from grounding each other, to compromise the personalising physical unity (ego-identity) we acquire when we first recognise our reflection in the mirror (Lacan 2006, 78). The painted side of the *skene* reflects the human form as society recognises it; like Lacan’s mirror, it tucks us respectably inside our skin, and maintains our individuality. But the dark side of the *skene*, like Dionysus himself, challenges propriety and releases desire. The resulting sense of physical and psychic disintegration may put us in mind of the drunken philosophers and thespians at the end of Plato’s *Symposium*; of Aristophanes’ Queer humans; of Oedipus’ wife-mother; and of anxious little Ernst. It is in this emotionally-charged, primally entangled space, where things belong together but have been split apart<sup>1</sup>, that drama and desire seem to originate.

Seen in this light, the *skene* deconstructs and reconfigures the Oedipus Complex for its audience. Its linguistic and pre-linguistic aspects set audiences on a cusp between knowing and being; between the *a-priori*, pre-existing structures provided by culture; and *a-posteriori* sensory evidence that connects us personally to external events we have to piece together ourselves. As we sharpen our definition of drama, this would be what makes it inescapably political. The peripety or reversal offered by the *skene* is temporal, but it does not relate to the duration of the performance, or the sequence in which the plot reveals the order of the play’s events. Performance practitioners can generate this imaginative engagement by being aware of the types of sign that are active at any particular moment. Audience desire is, as we have seen, activated by indices. When we interrupt the audience gaze, indices take audiences back to their most primal way of functioning. Relying on our other senses to guide us in an *a-posteriori* voyage of discovery may be a way into understanding how performance—how desire—thinks.

### Theorising entangled performance practice

Lacan has proved helpful in theorising the oblique connection, made by Plato and Freud, between drama and desire. His psycho-linguistic hybrid expands our grasp of the way we can think through the three spaces instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus. It also opens up new ways to understand the function of theatrical boundaries in activating audience desire. I want to continue to think through the connexion between drama and Lacanian discourse to explore how these three spaces interact performatively and create the political feedback loops Latour espouses. The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real registers guided Lacan’s life’s work as he explored first identity, then language, then corporeality; and latterly the different ways in which the three registers articulate in various sorts of psychic functioning. He used the three-dimensional structure of Borromean knots to understand how different configurations of the Oedipus Complex might give rise to different states of awareness.

For Lacan, Borromean knots show the different ways in which culture, individuals, and the unconscious (the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real respectively) can be knotted to constitute different types of subjectivity; different ways humans can experience reality without the loss of insight that

psychosis entails. Indeed, Lacan understood psychosis as the failure of the knot: if one link fails, the other two fall apart. When this happens the peculiarity of each register, which as Derrida (1978, 223) observed is distinct only in contrast to the others, is obscured. In hallucination (as in immersive and bedside theatre), the subject cannot distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Then, like Oedipus, (and like Latour's Modernists) we cannot make the crucial connexion between ourselves and our situation (between nature and culture) that gives us the autonomy we need to act effectively.

I propose we read the stage, backstage, and auditorium at the Theatre of Dionysus as a Borromean (that is to say, interconnected, interdependent, ecological) structure that echoes the Freudian psyche; or to be more accurate, the Freudian psyche echoes it. As we have seen Lacan's Graph of Desire expands Freud's binary life-death drives and Saussure's signifier-signified binary into a tripartite structure. Like Freud and Saussure's binaries, each aspect of Lacan's trilogy is irreducible to, yet inseparable from the others; no one entity is prioritised over the other two, and each has its being in that which lies outside of it. As a trilateral structure its interrelationships are more complex than the binary ones; but they give us an exciting new way to understand the connexion between drama and creativity because they figure a feedback loop like the one advocated by Latour. Here, the personal, social, and physical (feeling, thought, and action) can shift, each in relation to the other, offering changed perspectives.

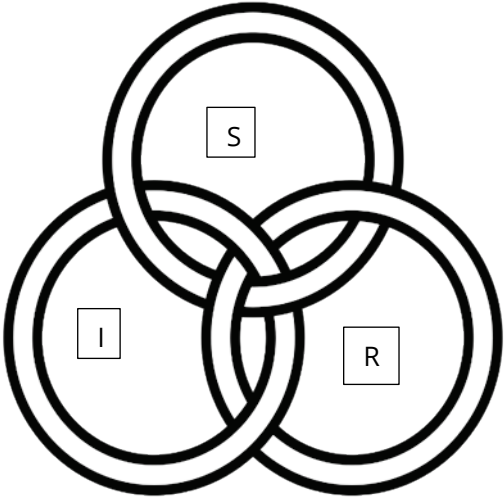
If we rupture any one of these connexions, the unity of the personal-political relation, instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, fails. In the context of the consulting room, the problem is private; a psychotic patient struggles to grasp that the things that seem so real to them cannot easily be socially shared. But in the context of the performance space the problem is civic; Latour's feedback loop between *a-posteriori* personal experience (action) and *a-priori* logocentric systems (thought and feeling) is broken. Then like Oedipus, the civic world does not know what it is doing to itself. As we have seen from the practice of bedside theatre, we should take our performance practices very seriously: the way we handle mind, body, and stage, can create civilisation or barbarity.

We can already see the importance of boundaries in the Borromean model. When they disintegrate, it becomes difficult to distinguish between words, images and bodies; between symbol, icon and index; between the social, the personal, and the corporeal. The *skene* and fourth wall boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus persisted in Early Modern theatre structures, such as the Globe and Rose theatres, and into Restoration and Proscenium models. It was in the Modernist period that theatre spaces began to disintegrate. Artaud dissolved the fourth wall, Brecht the *skene*, with Boal's Invisible Theatre leaving the building altogether (and in the process completely conning its audience). While these moves arguably put drama on the road to post-dramatic performance, they may have unintentionally helped relieve many performance practices of their personal and political relevance.

Psychoanalysis uses Borromean knots to figure the intersubjective space between patient and analyst; this paper proposes that we can use them to read the intersubjective space of performance. As we have seen, Borromean knots figure the different ways that mind, body, and

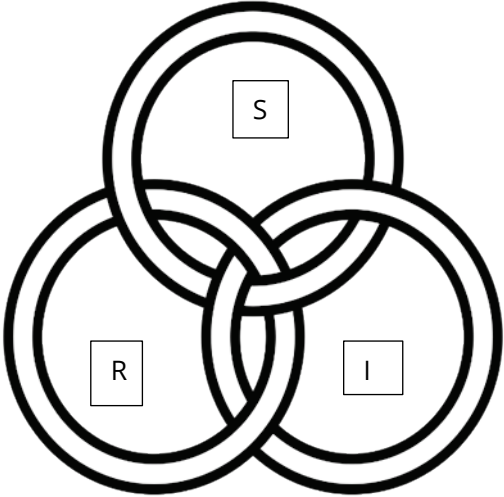
society can intersect. Most importantly from a political perspective, Borromean knots figure revolutionary reversals in power that do not sever the personal from the political.

When we look at the Lacanian version of the Borromean knot from one aspect, we see the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real plaited together, each overlapping the other in turn: the Symbolic suppresses the Imaginary, the Imaginary suppresses the Real, the Real suppresses the Symbolic.



*Fig 1. Prosopon: the skene's painted aspect. (How thought performs).*

When we look at it from its other aspect, each intersection—each power relation—is reversed: the Imaginary suppresses the Symbolic; the Real suppresses the Imaginary; the Symbolic suppresses the Real.



*Fig 2. Obscene: the skene's embodied aspect. (How performance thinks).*

The Borromean knot, like the *skene*, is three-dimensional, with three aspects—most importantly front and back. (Its view from above is not relevant here, although the Greeks did dramatize the roof of the *skene*. The statue of Dionysus was carried for the duration of his festival from his temple behind the *skene* onto the stage in front of it, as if he needed to see things from our side for a bit.) When the auditorium gazes at the painted front of the *skene* (or the surface of a screen), as in Fig. 1, images we recognise may command our attention more than the aspect we cannot see: the formal Imaginary suppresses the contiguities of the Real. But when the dramatic action moves behind the *skene* as in Fig. 2, the relation between the Imaginary and Real is reversed; audiences may try to piece together things they sense but cannot see.

When we link the Borromean structure of the Theatre of Dionysus with what Lacan has to say about the Borromean structure of the psyche, we can draw a comparison between some post-dramatic performance practices and psychosis. Post-dramatic performance frequently blurs the distinction between stage, auditorium, and the obscene space. When we abolish any one boundary two things happen to Borromean structure: it loses its inseparability and its irreducibility. If one link fails, the other two fall apart, are alienated from, and so cannot inform, the others. This means that the unity of the personal-political relation is lost and the Modernist division between culture and corporeality, observed by Latour, comes into focus. At the same time the irreducible peculiarity of each space, which (thanks to Derrida we realise) is distinct only in contrast to the others, disappears, so we cannot distinguish between them; the metaphorical space of the play is literalised as in hallucination. Alienation and immersion, which we may have considered antithetical performance practices, are both produced by boundary rupture. Both practices flatten the three dimensional complexity of the Borromean structure, so carefully constructed at the Theatre of Dionysus; in doing this they dismantle the contrast between *a-posteriori* (ontological) and *a-priori* (epistemological) perspectives to produce post-dramatic theatre. This contrast between nature, and culture's inevitably mistaken perception of it, this cusp between being and knowing which is the very stuff of drama, is lost when we focus only on the surface of the screen. When we reverse the Borromean knot on the other hand, its complexity is preserved, but every single power relation is radically altered. I am proposing this structure for radical and radicalising performance practices. If performance theory can get its head around the counterintuitive notion that differentiation unifies, while creating complexity in three dimensions, we can begin to grasp the ecology of dramatic entanglement at stake here.

For Lacanian analysts such as J-G Bursztein (2017), the Borromean knot figures 'the subjective body and its jouissances'. The Imaginary space represents the 'jouissance of the Imaginary body: perception of its image'; the Symbolic space, 'jouissance of the Symbolic body: speech'; and the Real, 'jouissance of the Real body: pleasure, pains' (27). We have already seen how the Theatre of Dionysus shares these pleasures of gaze, voice, and body, between its auditorium, stage, and backstage to generate its intersubjective space. And we have begun to understand the importance of the *skene* in returning audiences to states of prelinguistic creativity that put them in charge of signifiers, so that signifiers cannot perform on them. It is in the theatrical Real, its obscene space, that meaning is personalised; because here every pair of eyes splits from every pair of ears, opening the gaps—indices—in which the well-trodden connexions and expectations of culture may

be contested. This is where desire's libidinal energy is released, and so it may come as no surprise to find that it is also the space where drama's core foundational tropes of comedy and tragedy originate; laughter, pity-and-fear, seem to be Borromean reversals of each other. Seen in this light, Borromean reversals begin to look decidedly dramatic. Particularly if we drill down into the three sub-spaces where each register entangles with another, to contest its dominance, potentially reverse it, and open up a profoundly different perspective.

### Genre: words and bodies

I am proposing that we can figure comedy and tragedy in the contested space where the Symbolic and Real overlap in Borromean structure. In the theatre, this is between the Symbolic speaking stage and the Real backstage space; most precisely, the space in the doorway—a gap in the *skene* that allows actors to enter and exit the stage. And since the theatre divides modalities up spatially (the auditorium looks but the stage speaks and so on) it functions like a singular body, the *skene* its communal skin, boundary between domestic internality, and social externality.

Comedy seems to configure in Fig. 1, where the Real enters the Symbolic space, and the community is faced with something intensely personal. To give two examples from Aristophanes, when we are faced with Kinesias' unruly phallus in *Lysistrata* ([411 BCE] 2003); or when Dionysus accidentally empties his bowels onstage in *Frogs* ([405 BCE] 2006). Although these things are personal, and may be unexpected, we recognise them—recognition is crucial in comedy. The baby in the 'peekaboo' game laughs at the precise moment it recognises the face of its caregiver: at that moment it joins the signifying network.

But if we see comedy as a purely visual trope, we are being too literal about it; because in its broader sense comic recognition involves an intellectual manoeuvre, wherein sensation transmutes into a pattern we can cognitively understand. When we laugh, our body speaks: Lacanians understand laughter as an element of *lalangue*, a hylomorphic union of matter and form (Latour's nature and culture), 'where matter becomes the signifying network, as language' (Bursztein 2017, 26).<sup>2</sup> When the Real enters the Symbolic we, and everyone else who 'gets' the joke, become consciously aware of it. In this sense, comedy is receptive—the mind receives it. The great thing about laughter is that this particular form of libidinal release marks the precise moment the penny drops for each individual, making this moment of personal insight public. The belated laugh intensifies the joke, as Joey from 'Friends' can tell you. We sometimes fake a laugh as we might fake an orgasm because we want the other to think we are with them; the stage and laughing auditorium is like two orgasmic bodies in this respect; a place of social and physical union. If you are the butt of the joke, as Socrates was said to have been during a performance of one of Aristophanes' plays, you can become (in his case, dangerously) socially ostracised. The union of the social and physical that laughter signifies relates to Aristophanes' integrated archaic humans. It relates to the specific, yet oblique connexion made by Plato in the *Symposium*, between drama and *sexual* desire. Now we can understand the connection more clearly; we can associate comedy with communal *and* carnal knowledge; with social and sexual association; as the Early Modern dramatists, whose comedies ended in marriage, seem to have done. Perhaps drama was better understood in the past than it is now.

When Socrates declared that the same person should be capable of writing tragedies as comedies (Plato 1999, 80), it may be because he had understood tragedy as a straightforward reversal of the comic 'knot'. If comedy is integration, tragedy is isolation; but it is isolation the theatre community goes through together. If comedy stages the individual joining the signifying network, tragedy stages the community facing the signifying network's inadequacy, as Oedipus does when he realises that being a king and a hero mean little in the face of his true identity. Tragedy seems to configure in Fig. 2, where the Symbolic enters the Real; where the community faces a situation it cannot yet define, one it has to piece together communally *a-posteriori*. An example of this is Franko B's (2002) *Aktion 395*, where the audience queue up to confront Franko, one to one, in a confined space. Franko is wearing one of those plastic funnel-collars given to dogs post-op to stop them licking their wound. This opaque plastic *skene* separates Franko's head from his painted, naked, wounded body; it also means he struggles to see you as you enter his space. An important component of the show was the little group of participants listening, and waiting for people coming out afterwards: 'what happened with you?' We could hear him react to each of us very differently and it became personally important to understand how our own physical presence had precipitated such wildly different responses from Franko. If comedy concerns knowledge, tragedy is an ontological, existential gap. Plato's symposium transformed philosophical expositions of desire into something more physical: no wonder the notion of drama kept coming up. Perhaps, at the end of that evening, Socrates was trying to suggest that the cusp between knowing and being is right where drama places us.

But if we view tragedy as simply not seeing, we are being as reductive as viewing comedy as a purely visual trope. Tragedy is about the failure of 'peekaboo'; about not being able to identify things; when things do not form a recognisable pattern the signifying network fails. Oedipus blinds himself because he says, identifying his parents in Hades would be too painful. In Greek Tragedy in moments of crisis, protagonists make noises: 'aiee', 'oymoy', 'feu-feu'. Lacanians might view these voiced sounds as a form of *lalangue* that acknowledges the inarticulate dignity of suffering; like an animal's howl; or the invisible death-cry Greek tragedians wrote into their plays. If laughter signifies Bursztein's pleasure of the Real body, these sounds indicate its pains.

When the Symbolic enters the Real it is not only words that lose their meaning. In Euripides' play *Herakles* (1997), we hardly ever see its protagonist. At first, he is offstage in Hades, then he goes through the *skene* into the palace to save his family from usurping King Lycos. While inside, he is driven mad by avenging goddess Hera, and unwittingly murders his wife and children. When Herakles recovers from his delirium and returns to the stage he hides under his cloak in shame. The cloak opens up a sort of pixelated gap in which he is visible but not identifiable. Perhaps the gap allows us to feel for him, rather than condemn him.

Contemporary dramatist Edward Bond uses a similar strategy in many of his plays. His 2006 play for young people, *Tune*, is particularly notable for this. Teenager Robert spends the first four scenes of this six-scene play shut up in his bedroom behind the *skene*. Because we cannot see him, we rely on the spoken accounts of him, given by his mother, Sally, and her new partner, Vernon. Vernon is busy trying to win Sally's trust so that he can defraud her out of her savings; he does this by falsely

incriminating Robert in various acts of vandalism. When Robert eventually appears onstage, he comes through his bedroom wall, a shape draped in cloth identical to the wall. As with *Herakles*, and the participants in *Aktion 395*, Robert is an indexical presence, acutely felt, like an apparition. The sheer ontological physicality of the Real contrasts with the less reliable epistemological signifying systems that surround it—particularly as we see Vernon manipulating words and images so skilfully. We may be able to understand this pixelated gap in terms of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, the public re-cognition of a primal way of being which has been socially repressed.

### Play: bodies and mirrors

Perhaps we can configure mimetic and autopoietic play in the contested space where the Real and Imaginary overlap in the Borromean structure. In the theatre this is where the audience gaze encounters its limit at the painted face of the *skene*; where iconic semblances on one side of the *skene* meet indications of things on its other side. Drama that operates on the surface of the screen or *skene* limits itself to mimesis, as so much film and TV drama do. This is Fig. 1, where the Imaginary dominates the Real.

We can see it at work in the following exercise for drama students, devised by my colleague Lindsey Muir, to demonstrate the limitations of realism. Half of a group of students are sent to another space to devise a realistic bank robbery, while the other half quietly compile a list of the tropes they expect to see. After watching the devised bank robbery, the second group reveal what they had predicted: guns: tick; panic button: tick; 'get on the floor!': tick, and so on. Where do these tired old ideas come from, we wonder afterwards? From films, from TV, from 'culture', we conclude. When we are bound by realism we are caught up in mimesis or simulation, repeating and reflecting what culture thinks.

In Fig. 2, the Real dominates the Imaginary. As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 'there is no need to posit a specific imitative drive as the motive force behind children's play' ([1919] 2006, 143). For Freud, play is about agency not mimesis. Ernst's cotton-reel intersects the *fort-da* boundary of the *skene*—crucially without destroying or disavowing it. It crosses the 'X' of desire's chiasmus that Lacan plots on his Graph of Desire, and in a moëbius twist it privileges his desire to exceed the limitations of his predicament and get beyond his own skin; to be, as Lacan puts it 'the *fort* of a *da* and the *da* of a *fort*' (1998, 63). This is the Dionysian move made by actors, as well as playing children; but it is also as we have seen, the collapse of distance experienced by audiences when the action of the play goes behind the *skene*. It is the move made in the field of Drama in Education, when children go into role to explore their curriculum actively, instead of receiving it passively via words and images. As children go into role in the classroom, they behave as though they were onstage, in the sense that they behave according to the constraints of the imagined situation (Bolton 1992, 53–58). Unlike actors, they are not subject to the audience gaze; but like actors, audiences, and playing children, children in role are actively engaged in a situation they know is not real. It is not the reality of the situation, but their physical engagement in the fictional situation, that makes the Lacanian Real dominant here.

When teachers use role in the post-theatrical classroom context, they unleash an extraordinary creativity that contrasts vividly to the tired old clichés of the devised bank robbery above. Here's an example, designed by Professor David Davis, to demonstrate the experiential power of working in role. In pairs, A teaches B how to tie shoelaces. Then the exercise is repeated with the following additional constraints: A (parent, late for work again) encourages B (child, nearly ready to tie a bow for the first time by themselves) to get ready for school. A's desire to leave the house constrains B's desire to tie the bow without help, and vice versa. This second scenario generates a very pleasurable dramatic tension for the paired actors that was absent in the first; it is noticeable that the tension dissolves if the constraints are overcome or ignored. On reflection after the two examples of pair-work, workshop participants are able to compare simulation with drama, and can begin to grasp role and fiction as key ingredients of dramatic work. But something else also becomes apparent. When asked what they 'see' when in role, my drama students describe staircases, carpets, doorways, in colour and detail—the dramatic *mise-en-scene* that is so obviously absent in the classroom context. Are they hallucinating? No, because they know—they can see—they are in a classroom, just as actors and theatre audiences can see they are in a theatre. Immersive performance is hallucinatory precisely because its absence of boundaries removes the ability to distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Drama, I propose, because it employs boundaries, does not remove that ability. Yet at the same time it unleashes this extraordinary imaginative double-vision; images that 'land' unbidden, in the mind's eye, as vividly and unpredictably as dreams. The activity itself seems to 'think' them—perhaps because nobody is watching. In this post-theatrical classroom context, everything becomes a *skene*; an object which invites us to see beyond it.

#### Sense: eyes and ears

The last 'knot', where the Symbolic and Imaginary overlap, figures the play between audience gaze and speaking stage at the fourth wall boundary. For psychoanalysts, this is where meaning, or sense is negotiated. For dramatists, actors, and directors, this is where dramatic irony can be generated.

For instance, Sophocles gives Jocasta these lines:

Do not worry you will wed your mother.  
It's true that in their dreams a lot of men  
have slept with their own mothers, but someone  
who ignores all this bears life more easily.

(Sophocles [420 BCE] 2004, L1165–1168)

But the actor playing Jocasta may undercut these words with a casual maternal gesture, bringing the accuracy of what she says into question. Strindberg, in the experimental 'pantomime' section in Scene 1 of *Miss Julie* ([1888] 1987), prioritises the iconic register and activates the audience gaze by cutting out the spoken word completely for several (in the nineteenth century very daring) minutes. Notice how he takes care not to give the gaze to the actress in lieu of her voice, thereby keeping the fourth wall intact:

This should be played as if the actress were actually alone. When the occasion calls for it she should turn her back on the audience completely. She does not look towards them, and must not hasten her movements as though afraid lest they should grow impatient. (111)

Martin Crimp, on the other hand, switches off the audience super-power as *Attempts on her Life* (1997) begins, by setting Scene One in a blackout. As the audience listen to the messages on an answering machine, they receive the spoken word with nowhere to project their gaze. In Harold Pinter's play *Mountain Language* (1988), Scene 3, 'Voice in the darkness', is set in a torture chamber. A young woman comes in through the wrong door on a prison visit. She sees her husband, hooded, held up by his torturers. 'The lights dim to half. The figures are still' (8). We hear the voices of the couple, remembering a love scene in a boat on a peaceful lake in springtime. The effect of looking at a torture chamber while listening to a love scene is very poignant. The point here is that without destroying the fourth wall, drama can activate or suppress the audience gaze; activate or suppress the staged voice; or it can jar our habitual connexion between gaze and voice, to generate dramatic irony. But it is worth noting that when the Symbolic register is prioritised over the Imaginary, not only does logocentricity prevail, but the stage projects actively, and the auditorium receives its meaning.

### How thought performs; how performance thinks

This essay concludes its work using Borromean knots to theorise entangled performance practices, by drawing attention to desire's two very different processes. Both of these processes would seem to operate during dramatic performance, depending which aspect of the knot is in play.

In Fig. 1, the Symbolic suppresses the Imaginary, prioritising logocentricity; the Imaginary suppresses the Real, prioritising mimesis; and the Real suppresses the Symbolic, prioritising comedy. Each twist positions the auditorium to receive culture and conform to it, rather than create and change. This aspect of the knot would seem to figure the 'selfie' gaze, where the desire of the other inhabits, and represses, the body. It is tempting to relate Fig. 1 to the problems posed at the start of the article concerning our inability, in spite of understanding the science of climate dereliction, to change our disastrous culturally-embedded practices, and habits. In this state we are vulnerable to fake news; to the machinations of narcissistic politicians stirring up cultural enmities to consolidate their personal political power. It looks like a formula for the repetition compulsion Freud observes in his shell-shocked patients; like Lacan's take on Thanatos, whereby language stands in for and replaces embodied experience altogether.

In Fig. 2, on the other hand, the Imaginary suppresses the Symbolic, prioritising the audience gaze; the Real suppresses the Imaginary, prioritising *autopoiesis*; and the Symbolic suppresses the Real, prioritising tragedy. Each twist positions the civic community of the auditorium (or dramatized classroom<sup>3</sup>) to create as well as receive (see Katafiasz 2013, 2020). This would seem to figure how performance can impact society. Thucydides documents the extraordinarily creative culture

enjoyed by the Athenians, some thirty years after Winnington-Ingram tells us their practice of tragedy had become 'highly serious' (1999, 5):

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterised by a swiftness alike in conception and execution; you (the Lacedaemonians) have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act, you never go far enough. (Thucydides, cited in Castoriadis 1987, 208)

In the face of the challenges coming our way in the era of climate crisis, of pandemic, of war, it might help us to be more Athenian than Lacedaemonian; to think and act in more aesthetically sensitive, desirous ways, as Latour suggests. It may help us to rethink some of our post-dramatic practices in the light of this; to capitalise on the highly creative exchange of libidinal energy that the practice of drama can give us.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This insight originated in an actor's workshop given by dramatist Edward Bond to my students in 2018, in which he set a table and chair apart and asked the students to bring them together without touching them. He later said to them: all plays are written in that gap.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Bill Roper for referring me to Bursztein on *lalangue* shortly before he died in 2021. His generous and insightful Lacanian scholarship in relation to Drama in Education will be hugely missed.

<sup>3</sup> See Dorothy Heathcote's Conventions for Dramatic Action at <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DH-Dramatic-Conventions-MoE.pdf>

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## Biography

Kate Katafiasz is Programme Leader for Drama at Newman University, Birmingham, UK. Originally a school teacher specialising in Drama in Education, Kate obtained her PhD from The University of Reading in 2011. She has subsequently published extensively on Edward Bond's post-millennial plays, and has developed a particular interest in theorising the relationship between drama and desire. Her teaching and research explores how drama can be used to radicalize the relationship between words and bodies in ancient, educational, and post-structural contexts.

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## ANTIGONE'S CHOICE: TRAGEDY AND PHILOSOPHY FROM DIALECTIC TO APORIA

MAGDA ROMANSKA HARVARD UNIVERSITY

### Introduction

Written by Sophocles in 442 BCE, *Antigone* has survived over two millennia as a staple of both the philosophical and the dramatic canons, mainly because of its focus on the tragic battle between its main characters, the titular Antigone and Creon, her king and father-in-law, as a near-ideal illustration of dialectical/dramaturgical conflict between a number of binaries: state/family, human law / divine law, male/female. Tragedy is not dead, as George Steiner ([1961] 1980) argued, but its philosophical kernel—the thought—has shifted from dialectic to aporia, from binary to polynary. *Antigone*—with its multiple interpretations and critical lenses—illuminates this fundamental shift in our understanding of tragedy and, thus, the fundamental shift in the relationship between theatre and philosophy. This article offers a comparative analysis of multiple philosophical definitions of tragedy, attempting to illustrate how each of them grapples with forces within and without, both individual and collective. Tragedy and its various definitions is the crux that unifies theatre and philosophy, both struggling to understand and explain what makes tragedy a tragedy: an inescapable structural engine of history, subconscious self-destructive force of the death drive, a reflection of patriarchal and colonial hegemony, a function of state's biopower, and finally, an aporic condition of grief, and suffering. Tragedy and the tragic are products of self-aware consciousness; they are the markers of our humanity. We recognize something as tragic because we want to create meaning out of our human misery and suffering, and Antigone, with its multiple meanings and analysis, is one of the best dramatic vehicles to illustrate it. To quote Bonnie Honig (2013), in *Antigone*, "tragedy's power is not that it redeems suffering, but that it exemplifies it in ways that highlight what many think to be the human's most basic common denominator – the capacity to feel pain and suffer" (19).

## Tragedy as Dialectic: Hegel

Hegel was fascinated by both *Antigone* the play and Antigone the character, calling the play “the absolute example of tragedy” ([1827] 1988, 353) and Antigone herself “the most magnificent figure ever to have appeared on earth” (Hegel [1835] 1975, 509). Framing the main conflict of the play in a dialectical clash between the religious/familiar interests (Antigone) and the political/state interest (Creon), which he then aligns with the characters’ respective genders, Hegel uses *Antigone* to justify “the ethical order” of patriarchy itself (Hegel [1807] 1979, 228).<sup>1</sup> The funeral rites for Polynices, which Creon refuses and which Antigone insists upon, are, for Hegel, a mark of the ethical, ontological, and sexual differences between the two. In *Phenomenology* Hegel considers the play as a struggle between the feminine order of kinship, represented by Antigone, and the public sphere of “the ethical order,” the patriarchal statehood, represented by Creon. In the *Philosophy of Right* ([1820] 1967, 166), Hegel further aligns man with the order of the state, and woman with the sphere of “happiness of the Family.”

To sustain itself, Hegel suggests, the state needs the family unit, which he then designates as a woman’s domain; however, this domain, by its very nature, can exist only in conflict with the interest of the state (thus the male citizen is constantly torn between his allegiance to his country and his allegiance to his family). Or, as Judith Butler (2000) commented, according to Hegel, Antigone “is outside of the terms of the polis, but she is, as it were, an outside without which the polis could not be” (4). Hegel ([1807] 1979) himself describes “womankind” as “an internal enemy” of the community, since it “changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family” (228). In other words, by defining Antigone’s actions as a crime against an order that is “right,” Hegel establishes the law of the patriarchal state as unalienable and unquestionable. Thus, for Hegel, Polynices’ corpse becomes the site of an ethical order and patriarchal subject-formation. Antigone’s and Creon’s relationships to Polynices’ corpse provide thesis and antithesis of political discourse of the law, from which Hegel can then delineate the essential lines of gender difference, framing them in ontological, political, and ethical terms.

*Antigone*, the play, then, becomes a model of tragedy characterized by insolvable conflict. In *Glas* ([1974] 1986), Derrida summarizes Hegel’s point stressing the interrelation of two oppositions between “divine and human, subterranean and diurnal, feminine and masculine, familial and political, and so on” (166). Derrida further points out that tragedy, according to Hegel, results not from individual action, but from the juxtaposition of dialectical forces within the entire socio-ethical structure. For this reason, the death which ends the conflict is always inevitable. Derrida writes:

Tragic carnage: murder no longer proceeds from a voluntary decision; it is inscribed as a fatality in the operation’s structure. If the ethical substance unites the two laws, the operation always comes down to a singular individual. So the operation recreates the split, the opposition of the divine and the human, of the woman and the man. Each on his or her side, Antigone and Creon hear or read only one law; they lack and betray the other. (171)

The ethical foundation of the binary between Creon and Antigone determines the outcome of the dialectical conflict, not the individual decision of each protagonist.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, Creon and Antigone represent not just opposing forces but also “an internal dialectic [...] between simultaneous unifying and separating forces” (20). Antigone and Creon, are, after all, related. He is her father-in-law, the closest thing to a parental figure she’ll have from now on. Thus, the conflict, although insolvable, presents an opportunity for “inter-penetration”—to quote Hegel again—“their antithesis is rather the authentication of one through the other, and where they come into direct contact with each other as real opposites, their middle term and common element is their immediate inter-penetration” (Hegel [1807] 1979, 278, para. 463). That “inter-penetration” of two irreconcilable forces is what for Hegel constitutes the essence of tragedy, or as Derrida puts in in *Glas*, “The copulation of these two ‘opposite movements’ appeases nothing. There is no reconciliation. Here tragedy begins” (170).

The dialectical approach to tragic conflict which *Antigone* illustrates can be extrapolated to historical forces, in which, as Martin Donougho (1989, 67–68) summarizes, “History is viewed as a tragic struggle between positive and natural law, each of which much get its cyclical due.” Political philosophy should then take tragic drama—and its dialectics—as its model of history which happens as if “in the theatre,” with thesis and synthesis battling it out toward the synthetic reconciliation: “The true course of dramatic development consists in the annulment of contradictions viewed as such, in the reconciliation of the forces of human action, which alternately strive to negate each other in their conflict,” Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1215) concludes. In her book *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), Martha Nussbaum notes that Hegel’s concept of synthesis (as the reconciliation of two opposing dialectical forces) would suggest that tragedy represents “a primitive or benighted stage of ethical life and thought,” since the reconciliation only happens after the tragedy has taken place (while the proper rational reasoning would prevent it) (51). Antigone and Creon, Nussbaum writes, “resolve tensions in the wrong way; but the play shows us how to resolve them in the right way” (52). Tragedy understood as dialectic reveals the possibility of catharsis as synthesizing force, but only after the catastrophe already happens.

Many contemporary critics influenced by the Hegelian interpretation of *Antigone* as a dialectical conflict consider the play a political allegory in which the character of Antigone represents a defiant political protest, often in the face of overwhelming force of the unjust totalitarian rule (apartheid, fascism, communism, colonialism,<sup>3</sup> etc.). She is “a defender of human rights against the monstrosity of tyrannical, repressive regimes”—as Tina Chanter summarizes it (2010, 23).<sup>4</sup> Many modern adaptations and stagings of the play, including Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* and Athol Fugard’s *The Island*, provide similar interpretations. Seeing the play as a political allegory of liberatory struggle, Chanter very much relies on the same presumptions of realism that Hegel partakes. However, whereas Hegel sees the tragic as the unresolvable dialectical conflict of two equally valid ethical positions, Chanter sees the tragic in the discrepancy between the righteousness of Antigone’s cause and her lack of power to execute it. Chanter writes:

Antigone calls attention to the blindness and hypocrisy of a polity that defines its membership by precluding as worthy of full political participation those on whom

it nonetheless remains dependent materially and psychically. Such a polity requires unconditional loyalty from subjects on whom it refuses to confer political rights. It requires, that is, that such subjects remain silent about their right to be authorized as sovereign citizens, that they remain acquiescent to, subjugated by a political system whose efficacy their silent existence ensures. (24)

The vulnerability, frailty, and failure of the righteous to advance their cause is the essence of tragedy, Chanter suggests. Such definition of the tragedy parallels the morally unambiguous ethos of Christian passion play and Romantic melodrama, where the martyrdom of the good at the hands of the evil finds resolution and redemption in the unequivocal clarity of its moral purpose. Tragedy is the unfairness of the universe, its silence in the face of suffering of the weak, the unjust distribution of social and political power, and dramaturgically, a failure to deliver the satisfying closure of the poetic justice. Such understanding of tragedy, although perhaps closest to its colloquial meaning, skews the nuance of Hegel's interpretation towards prima facie axiom of human relations: the weak are powerless, the powerless are weak. This tautology is tragic, Chanter implies, because we humans aspire to moral order that transcend the ubiquitous of animal kingdom. Antigone, the character, represents that moral order (the law of the Gods), and *Antigone*, the play, its idealistic, rebellious, and doomed pursuit.

### Tragedy as Death Drive: Lacan

In psychoanalytical discourse, tragedy is brought forth by the internal, subconscious forces that drive our decision-making, offering a startling vision of the human subject as fundamentally condemned to self-destructive impulse. Following Freud, Lacan locates the tragic in the death drive: a fatalistic, subconscious, and irrational suicidal drive. Lacan's (and subsequently Žižek's) interpretation of Antigone as inexplicable, irrational Other is derived from Martin Heidegger, who, in *The Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953) defines her as 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*). Un-canny, for Heidegger is "that which throws one out of the 'canny,' that is, the homely, the accustomed, the unusual, the endangered. The unhomely does not allow us to be at home" (161). At the same time, however, Heidegger considers Antigone's un-canniness to be an essential human condition: "the uncanniest is the basic trait of the human essence, into which every other trait must always be drawn" (161). We are not at home in the world, Heidegger seems to suggest, and the very nature of our existence, its randomness, the alienation of our selves from ourselves and the other, is un-canny.

Although he picks up Heidegger's thread, Lacan diverts from it by defining Antigone's un-canniness as an aberrant, self-destructive, element of human condition, and more importantly, in opposition to the *canny* of the ego and superego. In Lacan's psychoanalytic reading of Sophocles' play, Antigone, the character, embodies a "pure death drive." In his essay "The Essence of Tragedy," Lacan ([1959–1960] 1997a) writes that Antigone

literally cannot stand it anymore. Her life is not worth living. She lives with the memory of the intolerable drama of the one whose descendance has just been

destroyed in the figures of her two brothers. She lives in the house of Creon; she is subject to his law; and that is something she cannot bear. (263)

Giving consideration for the unconscious motives that drive fascination with transgression, Lacan's analysis of *Antigone* suggests that the transgressor embodies a surplus, lost enjoyment. This attitude of a "paradise lost," according to Lacan, is symptomatic, and the tragic appeal of Antigone's transgression lies in Antigone's self-destructive drive beyond this border: entering into the realm of the Real equals suicide.

For Lacan, Antigone epitomizes a pure death drive; she persists in her convictions with terrifying perseverance, fully conscious of her fate and unmoved by it. But the act of saying no to the existing structure intrinsically implies the act of saying yes to something else, and Antigone breaks the human law in the name of higher values of God's order. Her subjectivism, although opposed to social structure, is grounded within the paradigm of higher principles, which, in turn, is grounded within the symbolic order of the absolutes. Thus, Antigone's obstinate drive to self-annihilation is simultaneously a transgression against an order and re-establishment of another order of the absolutes. The rebel negates, but also ascertains, Žižek argues, quoting Camus ([1951] 1991): "Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow one is right" (13). The very nature of rebellion lies in the affirmation of "something higher," of some absolute: "An act of rebellion [...] seems like a demand for clarity and unity. The most elementary form of rebellion, paradoxically, expresses an aspiration to order" (23). In her assertion of the absolutes, the rebel is the propeller of the higher order, one that exists beyond the social structure. She is the proof of the overarching, big Other, the provider of meaning and significance, of the "subject presumed to know" the ultimate truths. Hence crimes committed in the name of love (romantic or other), revolution, social progress, and one's sense of justice have been often forgiven, if not in the trials of legal courts then in the courts of public opinion. They testify to the existence of the higher-order values, providing something absolute which cannot be questioned and which holds the body of the social fabric in its stitches. (Ironically, the only crimes of higher order that Western culture ceased to forgive are those committed in the name of God.)

In Žižek's (1988) interpretation of Lacan, the Lacanian traumatic kernel of the Real is located between the two deaths: the real and the symbolic (132). By entering into the realm of the Real, beyond *perdition*, Antigone is driven by the first death drive, the desire for physical annihilation, and by the symbolic pleasure principle, the desire to establish an order of supreme values. Driven by the death drive, she goes beyond the pleasure principle of ordinary reality (the pleasure based on objective social relations), but she follows the subjective pleasure principle of the symbolic order (the pleasure of reconstituting herself as a pure subject within the symbolic order of the absolutes). It is only the annihilation of the symbolic order—the impossibility of symbolization—that signifies absolute annihilation: "the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which the so-called reality is constituted" (132). The "second death" is the death of absolutes, the death of everything. The second death lies beyond the symbolic pleasure principle and beyond the pleasure principle of reality. If the first death is still incorporated within the symbolic system of the social order, the second death leads into the realm impossible to comprehend. It leads to pure nothingness. By

crossing the line of the second death, the transgressor breaks both the order of reality and the symbolic order: she rejects the social structure along with its symbolic umbrella within which her act is absorbed—she rebels against the social order and she rejects her own rebellion.

For Lacan, Antigone is an empty vessel of irrationality, the very embodiment of the death drive that fundamentally defines female subjectivity. Stubborn in her inexplicable and—according to Lacan—unjustifiable insistence on burying the corpse, Antigone is “inhuman,” but, Lacan ([1959–1960] 1997b) adds, “we shouldn’t situate her at the level of the monstrous” (263). Her inflexibility is, Lacan writes, what makes her a “tender and charming little thing” in the popular discourse, but it is this inflexibility that makes her go “beyond the limits of the human” (66). Or, as Žižek puts it, beyond the line of *até*, the line of irresistible and self-annihilating desire. The tragic appeal of Antigone’s transgression lies in her self-destructive drive beyond the border of the human: entering into the realm of *até* equals suicide. Žižek (1992) writes: “The barrier not to be crossed is none other than the one beyond which Antigone is drawn, the forbidden boundary-domain where ‘being insists in suffering’” (25). Antigone is the epitome of *aphanisis*, “the self-erasure of the subject when she approaches her fantasy too closely” (Žižek 1997, 175).

Both Lacan and Žižek see Antigone’s fantasy as specifically feminine: she desires symbolic self-erasure in the big male Other. Antigone is “between two deaths”: her physical death and her symbolic death, which signifies a total eradication of the subject’s symbolic universe. What she strives for, they argue, is a total symbolic erasure from the semiotic and ontological language of the heteromatrix. Žižek (1988) states the issue in terms of the Freudian question “what does woman want?”: “It is Antigone herself who necessarily evokes in us, pathetic everyday compassionate creatures, the question ‘What does she really want?’ the question which precludes any identification with her” (117). It is this lack of identification with the subject—the character’s death-driven self-expulsion beyond the line of perdition, beyond our understanding—that constitutes the essence of tragedy in Lacan’s psychoanalytical discourse.

In his essay on Lacan’s interpretation of *Antigone*, Terry Eagleton (2010), notes that the very nature of the drive, which Lacan argues pushes Antigone towards self-destruction, is at the core of Western understanding of tragedy and in fact, even Western ethics. Eagleton writes:

In a modern era where no moral commitment can apparently be securely founded, what matters is less the substance of your claim than the preternatural tenacity with which you cling to it. [...] in the terrible splendour of its intensity, which then becomes—like much modern tragedy itself—a kind of secular form of transcendence all of its own. (104)

The cause of transgression, Eagleton notes, is not as important as the intensity of rebellion, which becomes a form of performative pronouncement of one’s selfhood: Antigone’s claim. Because Creon’s edict is a perlocutionary speech act made publicly (as defined by J.L. Austin: it makes the law as it is being pronounced), to oppose it, Antigone’s gesture must also be performative, and it must be visible (the gesture makes a statement of defiance). In fact, Antigone berates Ismene’s offer to keep the matter private, telling her: “I will hate you still worse for silence—should you not

proclaim it to everyone" (II. 99–100). As Judith Butler points out, "Like Creon [...] Antigone wants her speech act to be radically and comprehensively public" (28). It is the tragic nature of human existence that this performance, necessary for the assertion of the self, must also lead to its self-annihilation.

### Tragedy as Patriarchy: Butler and Irigaray

In response to Hegel as well as Lacan, in feminist interpretations, Antigone has often been heralded as a tragic heroine who sacrifices herself on the altar of sexual politics in the name of higher principles. For feminist theorists, however, Antigone's death drive is not internal and essential to her very being (as a woman) as it is for Lacan; instead, it is a function of the sociopolitical discourse of the heteronormative matrix which presupposes female self-sacrifice as axiomatic for the patriarchal status quo. In this interpretation, the essence of tragedy is rooted in the loss of female agency in service of patriarchal conflict and the tension between conscious and unconscious participation in the execution of that loss.

Masculinity in *Antigone's* world is in fact defined by the legal power of one's illocutions: if Antigone is not punished, Creon says, "now I am no man, but she the man" (Ant. 528–29). This juxtaposition between the masculine order of the law and feminine order of self-destruction necessarily genders the definition of tragedy, externalizing Antigone's downfall onto Creon: it is not her but his tragic flaw that bring destruction to the polis and the family. It is that lack of flexibility, Creon's self-destructive drive towards male self-certainty and self-perception as a lawgiver that destroys him and the polis he was chosen to rule. Tina Chanter (2010) takes this to imply that masculinity is the performance of an unstable signifier, and this performance is the essence of the tragic. In *Glas* ([1974] 1986), Derrida makes similar point:

Human law, the law of the rational community that institutes itself against the private law of the family, always suppresses femininity, stands up against it, girds, squeezes, curbs, compresses it. But the masculine power has limit. (187)

Masculinity performed to extreme folds on itself revealing itself as pure performance.

Although Luce Irigaray (1985) praises Antigone as a model of "identity and identification for many girls and women living today" (70), she ultimately concludes that Antigone should be viewed through the prism of the socially devalued maternal affiliation: that is, as a product of "a culture that has been written by men alone" (Irigaray 1993, 118). Irigaray (1993) writes:

When engaged in redressing her brother's crime, Antigone is no longer fulfilling her own task, her affirmative relationship to ethics, she no longer serves her gods. The female gender, in its singularity, has been lost in this character who resists but nonetheless submits, out of womanly—or maternal?—fidelity to the male gods and to war among men [...] In order to wipe a stain once more. What stain? Fundamentally, the stain of her consciousness, of belonging to the female race of having maternal filiation. (125)

In other words, by burying her brother (against the wishes of her sister), Antigone aligns herself with the needs of the patriarchy, with the main conflict internal to patriarchal order itself—this is her tragedy. Indeed, although she is the titular heroine of the drama, Antigone appears in very few scenes of Sophocles' play. Antigone speaks less often than she is spoken *about* or *on behalf of* by men: Creon, Haemon, and Tiresias. It is the intercourse between the men—not that between Antigone and Creon—that establishes the primary battleground of the play, with Antigone a mere vessel for male conflict.

Following Irigaray, for Judith Butler (2000), Antigone “emblemizes a certain heterosexual fatality” (72) that always already presupposes female self-sacrifice as part of its econo-symbolic exchange. In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler tries to discern the stakes of Antigone's struggle, and she eventually concludes that Antigone cannot be viewed as a feminist figure because the conflict she embodies, between kinship and society (her allegiance to her brother vs. to her king/uncle), is itself bound by patriarchal underpinnings. Antigone refuses to follow the patriarchal power structure of the state as represented by Creon, but only on the grounds of honoring the patriarchal power structure within her family circle, as represented by Polynices. Thus, Butler argues, Antigone's claim to remain loyal to Polynices is prompted by the patriarchal form of kinship in the same way that the state's claim to have her disown it is prompted by its patriarchal *status quo*.

Antigone's “certain feminist impulse” cannot be seen as a model for resistance, Butler argues, because it does not challenge the patriarchal order as such, but merely its application (72). Butler writes: “Antigone emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalous impure” (5). Not only does Antigone speak within the language of the patriarchal system, Butler suggests; she also embodies a certain fatality marked by a self-fulfilling expectation of failure. There is one liberatory potential in Antigone's futility, Butler says, which is yet unimaginable: “One might reapproach Antigone's ‘fatality,’” she writes, “with the question of whether the limit for which she stands, a limit for which no standing, no translatable representation is possible, is not precisely the trace of an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future” (40). Antigone's rebellion, Butler suggests, offers a vision of alternative ethics in which marginality ceases to be so.

In turn, *Antigone*, the play, Butler argues, can be viewed in a modern context, putting into question the sociopolitical valuation of public grief, and loss: “which social arrangements can be recognized as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential loss?” The question of public recognition of one's death and public mourning has a particular historical significance for the LGBTQ community, whereas “those with publicly ungrievable losses—from AIDS, for instance—know too well” (24). As Audronė Žukauskaitė (2010) puts it, Antigone's act “is not an idiosyncratic transgression, motivated by her ‘pathological’ desire, but a universal transgression, identifying with the position of those who lack recognition in the public space” (80). The pursuit of this visibility is a righteous pursuit of justice as defined not by the law of the state, but by the dignitary claim to existence within the social structure of destructive autocratic illocutions.

In a sense, Chanter, Irigaray, and Butler share Lacan's analysis that Antigone's death drive is the source of the tragic, where they differ is in their views on the source of that drive. For Lacan, Antigone self-destructs in the pursuit of her female destiny, to be erased in the male Other. But for Chanter, Irigaray and Butler, Antigone's self-destruction is orchestrated by the male Other and located in the entire enterprise of the patriarchal state, its sociocultural and political framework, including its law.

### Tragedy as Power: Foucault

Many contemporary critics and theorists read *Antigone* through the "reframing [of] the contemporary conflicts between contrary social, political and cultural values as *tragic* conflicts" (de Boer 2008, 32). Such readings point out the fundamentally paradoxical nature of power and the law that supports it: neither can exist without the other. In the poststructuralist definition of tragedy, the tragic constitutes mutually exclusive claims of power within the very structure of the state (not in its opposition), and the limit of this power. Thus, *Antigone* illustrates what Derrida (2003) calls *autoimmunity*: the limits of the law and power that form the foundations of the state, the limits that delineate the state's own suicidal impulse to violate the law that defines it (94). In his essay "Tragedy and Philosophy," Anthony J. Cascardi (2009) notes that *Antigone*, the play, illustrates not so much the tragedy of conflict but the tragedy of the state:

[I]f we consider Antigone more closely, what we see is not so much a struggle between two sets of laws, or between two conflicting sets of claims (family, state), but a tragedy that revolves around a political question, namely Creon's attempt to extend the laws of the polis in such a way that they apply *universally*. [...] *Antigone* is a tragedy that is rooted in the temptation to take the polis not as an *image* of the whole but as the whole itself. (170)

Creon sees himself as the stand-in for the state, believing that he acts in its best interest. To quote Martha Nussbaum (1986): "No claims are allowed to count as claims of justice unless they are claims on behalf of the city, no agents to be called just except in its service" (56). Creon's legitimacy is reaffirmed by his ascendancy to power, and by the law of the state. Yet he is also given the power to suspend the law that gives him that power, and thus ends up destroying it. As Katrin Beushausen (2008) explains, "In the body of the sovereign, the law sanctions its own suspension of the order on which the sovereign's authority is based" (18). By resisting Creon's edict, Antigone exposes "the paradox embedded in the law, revealing its fragility. Once this denouement is performed, the law loses its stability" (ibid.). The state as such cannot exist outside the law, yet the law is what can also destroy it. Creon suspends the law of burial on the basis of the law that gives him power to suspend it; but by suspending the law, he simultaneously undermines it and, thus, his power to suspend it.

The suspension of the law, which Agamben (2005) defines as "the state of exception" (104), marks the limit of the law: the sovereign cannot legitimize lawlessness without having hold on power, yet he simultaneously cannot maintain power without some sort of law. Thus, *Antigone* illustrates the tragedy of the state of *autoimmunity*, which Derrida (2003) defines as the "strange behavior where

a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its 'own' immunity" (94). The play thus lays bare the limits of democracy which necessarily violates its own norms in its own name, destroying itself yet incapable of resisting that violation and self-destruction (Beushausen 2008, 25).

In a poststructuralist framework, tragedy is defined as a political dialogue on the nature of the state and its intrinsically impossible attempt to accommodate its conflicting interests of law and power. To quote Jean-Pierre Vernant (1972):

What tragedy is talking about is itself and the problems of law it is encountering. [...] Not only does the tragedy enact itself on stage, but most important, it enacts its own problematics. It puts in question its own internal contradictions, revealing (through the medium of the technical legal vocabulary) that the true subject matter of tragedy is social thought and most especially juridical thought in the very process of elaboration. Tragedy poses the problems of law, and the question of what justice is. (278–279)

Looking even further, one sees that *Antigone* is a political play about a state being forced to decide and in the process of choosing between its two survival modes: the biopower of sanitary considerations and the universality of the law, both essential to the survival of the state as a political structure and as a communal entity. The universality of the law on which the state is built is fragile and unstable; it depends on the multifaceted aspects of power and its execution, including biopower, the power over human bodies, both the living and the dead. Antigone is an "ideological battleground"—to borrow a term from Gayatri Spivak (1999)—between the law and the biopower of the state discourse. She embodies what Michel Foucault (2000) calls the state's "politico-sanitary discourse" (147).

Many contemporary critics forget that Polynices' corpse is at the center of the story: what happens to it, and why, are the two questions that initiate and drive the play's plot and political discourse. Antigone's fate is invariably bound to the fate of Polynices' corpse, and the arguments that Antigone makes and that are made on her behalf, either to defend her (by Haemon and Tiresias) or to condemn her (by Creon), revolve around the proper way to treat Polynices' corpse. Hegel, Lacan, Irigaray, and even Butler refer to Polynices as if he were still alive; they don't consider his body beyond a reference to the funeral rites that get Antigone into trouble. But the play profusely elaborates on the material condition of the corpse: the stench, the rotting, and the scavengers that feed on the carcass are all there. The odor of rotting flesh is carried by the wind, lingering at the gates of the city, reminding the citizens of what happens to traitors. The vultures rip the meat to pieces that they then drop onto holy altars as they fly over them. What happens to the body is both physical (it rots and smells) and symbolic (it needs funeral rites so as not to rot and smell). The smell of the rotting body serves as a political tool to keep the citizens in check and to strengthen Creon's authority. For his edict to be effective, the body has to rot; it has to give off the odors of death, reminding his subjects about the power that let it rot. The funeral rituals are performed by Antigone on religious grounds: honoring the age-old customs ordered by gods and ancestors. But the corpse is also a site of the biopower that delineates the relationship between the sovereign

and death; it is a site of the “politico-sanitary discourse” that defines the nature of the state and its opposing but equally valid interests.

A Hegelian reading of the play focuses almost exclusively on the dialectical battle between Antigone and Creon, omitting the relationships that both have with the other characters, particularly Haemon and Tiresias, each of whom is a stand-in for a separate political argument: the *political* and the *sanitary* of the “politico-sanitary” discourse. Antigone is caught between the legal and sanitary discourse, veiled, respectively, by the secular and the sacred letter of the law. Each side of the debate frames Antigone through a different lens, using her for its own ends.

The conversation between Creon and Haemon focuses on the nature of the state and the function of the sovereign. Arguing with Haemon, Creon tries to hold on to his idea of power and authority, one that involves absolute control over the living and the dead:

CREON: Oh?—  
Isn't that just the sickness that's attached her?  
HAEMON: The whole city of Thebes denies it, to a man.  
CREON: And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?  
HAEMON: Now, you see? Who's talking like a child?  
CREON: Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?  
HAEMON: It's no city at all, owned by one man alone.  
CREON: What? The city is the king's—that's the law! (l. 825)

The dialogue is a subtle bow toward Athenian democracy, but it is also a political dialogue that establishes the universality of the law and the role of statesmen (*politicos*). The other side of the debate is illuminated in Creon's later conversation with Tiresias, the blind prophet, who makes the connection between religious rites and their sanitary implications:

The public altars and sacred hearths are fouled,  
one and all, by the birds and dogs with carrion  
torn from the corpse, the doomstruck son of Oedipus! (line 1135)

To which Creon replies:

You'll never bury that body in the grave,  
not even if Zeus' eagles rip the corpse  
and wing their rotten pickings off to the throne of god!  
Never, not even in fear of such defilement  
will I tolerate his burial, that traitor. (line 1150)

Antigone fails in her rebellion because she relies on “theologico-religious” obligations to justify what is fundamentally a sanitary interest of the state. But Tiresias's argument, which finally outweighs Creon's stubbornness, is devoid of private interest and focuses on sacrificial responsibility as part of the sanitary procedure that the state must obey.

In *Politics*, Aristotle considers the most important role of the politician to be that of lawgiver (*nomothetês*), defining the appropriate constitution for the city-state, including its laws, customs, and institutions. According to Aristotle, the very existence of the city-state depends on its ruler; the community exists only insofar as it has someone who orders it. Aristotle (2000) states that “the person who first established [the city-state] is the cause of very great benefits” (I.2.1253a30–31). As Fred D. Miller (1997) notes, “This person was evidently the lawgiver (*nomothetês*), someone like Solon of Athens or Lycurgus of Sparta, who founded the constitution.” The power of the statesman depends on his authority, which must be acknowledged by all members of the polis. Thus, Creon’s understanding of his function as a lawgiver rests on his unfaltering belief in the authority of his position: he considers his authority as lawgiver to be necessary the survival of the state as a whole, even if it threatens the city from within (or from without). The public, postmortem punishment of Polynices’ body has, for Creon, a specific political function: it reaffirms his authority as *nomothetês*.

Greek funeral rites were elaborate and rich, offering an opportunity to display the family’s wealth and the strength of its kinship bonds. The rites (*kedeia*) consisted of three parts: *protheis* (the public display of the body), *ekphora* (the procession), and, finally, the disposal of the body. The corpse, dressed in a long gown and a crown of flowers, was displayed in public for two days, allowing the community a final opportunity to contemplate the deceased. After two days, the body was taken in a procession for either burial or public cremation (Kurtz 1971). Nicole Loraux (1986) points out that funerals of soldiers also had a civic function: they offered the opportunity for a funeral oratory that praised the dead man’s valor and his commitment to the state. The ceremony, Loraux argues, was essential to the “invention of Athens” as a political institution. In the fourth century, however, “the crisis in public values [...] offered a greater threat to the genre [of funeral orations]. Freed from the austere civic framework in which the democratic city had enclosed it in the fifth century, death was once again and more than ever a private affair” (109). Written in 442 BCE, *Antigone* captures the essential question of this transition: To whom does the body of the dead belong, the state or the family? Agamben’s (2005) concept of the sovereign “right of death” describes the right of the sovereign to give death and to interpret it. But the state’s ownership of the dead is complicated by its responsibility toward the living. As Foucault (2000) points out, “biopower” encompasses all aspects of control over bodies as such, including the protection of “the living from the harmful influence of the dead” (147). In “The Birth of Social Medicine,” Foucault (2000) notes that, within different cultural communities, religious discourse evolved as a veil hiding the “politico-sanitary discourse” of death. The symbolic purpose of funeral rites was to pay tribute to the gods, but their pragmatic purpose was to prevent the biohazard that the dead could potentially inflict; the dead had to be disposed of because corpses presented a real danger to cities and their inhabitants (147). Even Hegel ([1807] 1979) notes as much:

The dead, whose right is violated, knows therefore how to find instruments of its vengeance, which are of an actuality and potency equal to the power that injures it. These powers are other commonwealths whose altars the dogs or birds defiled with the corpse. [...] They rise up in hostility and destroy the commonwealth which has dishonoured and shattered its force. (para. 474)

Left unburied, the dead brought disease and the vultures, rats, and hyenas who fed on corpses. To leave a corpse unburied has a symbolic meaning (the dead is deprived of religious rites), but, foremost, it implies a clear and present danger to the living. Thus, leaving Polynices' body to rot in the Grecian sun, Creon acts not only in the name of the universal law that he established and that he believes will help hold the state together (by maintaining his power) but also against the biopower of sanitary precepts that allow the community to survive free of plague and other death-related biohazards. He exercises his sovereign "right of death," but in doing so he undermines the basic rules of biopower as necessary for survival for the community as a whole. How is the state to choose between one and the other if the two are at odds?

The play thus illustrates the state in crisis, asking itself whether the abstract rules that govern it should give way to "politico-sanitary reasons," or whether the rule of law provides such a strong foundation for the state that without it the state itself would disintegrate. Neither Antigone nor Creon speaks in the name of the state, simply because the state itself is inconsistent about where it should place its alliances: with the authority of the law or with biopower. Thus, the principal question the play poses pertains not to the conflict between individual and social interests but to the conflict internal to the construction of the state as such, and to the limits of power and the law. What is more important: to preserve the political institution of the city-state (its law as represented by the monarch), or to follow the basic sanitary precautions that protect the community from dangerous biohazards? The suspension of the law in the "state of exception"—to borrow Agamben's term—leads to the *autoimmunity* of the law—to borrow Derrida's term. The law and power self-destruct in their co-dependency. Tragedy not only illustrates this internal conflict but also provides meta-commentary on its public restaging. Yannis Stavrakakis (2003) summarizes this point succinctly:

It is the tragedian who assumes and re-inscribes radical socio-political critique within the heart of the city, reproducing democratic society by re-examining again and again—through a series of aesthetico-political re-acts—its ethico-political premises. (126)

The role of Antigone as an ethical subject disappears, and her voice is not a voice of political agency that could be appropriated as a model of political opposition or dialectical agon. In a poststructuralist interpretation of the play, the individual agency dissolves and the tragic resides in the performative impossibilities of power and law itself. Tragedy reveals power for what it is: a performative gesture.

### Tragedy as Aporia: Beyond Character

Even as these philosophical approaches to *Antigone* have moved on from Hegelian frameworks, for the most part they have shared with Hegel a firmly rooted assumption of realism,<sup>5</sup> with proper, true-to-life, consistent, and plausible characters—per Aristotle<sup>6</sup>—and with all the interpretational trappings of what Szondi ([1956] 1987) calls Drama (16; see also 8–9): a dialogic ("consist[ing] only of the reproduction of interpersonal relations") and Absolute ("conscious of nothing outside itself")

form of mimicry of human relations.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the philosophical interpretations of the play that followed Hegel, from Kauffman, Lacan, and Irigaray, to Žižek and Butler, assume—like Hegel—its “real life” mimicry, with fully formed “true to life” Aristotelian characters as its central focus.<sup>8</sup> This approach has also been a typical methodology in the dramatic canon—again, on account of Hegelian exegesis—including introductory drama courses where the play predominantly figures as an example of a classical agon: a tragic conflict between two true-to-life agents who both appear to be right and to be moved by sufficient passion—and hamartia—to drive the plot to its inevitable tragic, and cathartic, ending.<sup>9</sup>

In both of these critical traditions, the philosophical and the dramatic, the character is “the epicenter of dramatic conflict,” as Bernd Stegemann (2009, 16) puts it. Starting with the twentieth-century avant-garde, however, theatre became less and less interested in character as a foundation of drama and what follows, as the foundation of the theatrical experience itself.<sup>10</sup> Today, in the era of postdramatic theatre and theory, previous assumptions about the role of character no longer hold true: the character no longer must serve as a basis of drama and, what’s most important, its interpretation; character is, as Elinor Fuchs (1996) taught us, dead. The postdramatic shift from psychology to non-representational models, allegory, and metaphor, has also allowed us to rethink the classic texts (in theatre at least), looking for modes of analysis that perceive them as something else, a conceptual, even abstract artform rooted in the conflict of ideas rather than people.

The postmodern death of character in theatre followed from philosophy’s assault on the monolithic idea of “man”—in the poststructuralist and posthumanist lineage (following Foucault’s 1966 essay “The Order of Things,” Derrida’s 1972 essay “The Ends of Man,” and Barthes’ 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”), and in opposition to the traditional Renaissance-era humanist ethics and aesthetics, which presupposed a coherent vision of the human being as imbued with certain essential characteristics (i.e., “soul” and “human nature”) and visually represented by the intact body. Just as “man” exited the twentieth-century philosophical discourse, so did “character”—portrayed by an actor—disappear from the twentieth-century theatrical landscape, subsumed under the new materialist and poststructuralist understanding of theatrical space. As Robin Nelson (2010) puts it:

[P]aralleling the displacement from centre stage of “Man as the measure of all things,” the actor’s agency and centrality are further diminished by her demotion from the apex of the hierarchy of stage signs. The performer today is just one of many signifiers in a complex, multi-layered event. (23)

In postdramatic theatre, neither the character nor the actor is the cynosure of the theatrical event: in fact, the frequent interlocking of the two is what dethroned them from their previous status near the top of the Aristotelian dramaturgical ladder. Bernd Stegemann (2009) argues that postdramatic theatre has brought with it an awareness of the artificiality of the character and, with it, the awareness of the artificiality of the theatrical project itself, thus unraveling the foundational aspect of Drama, its fiction, the mimetic suspension of disbelief:

Postdramatic theater's entire rejection of drama lies in this one damnation. The act of observing humans for the purpose of examining and understanding their behavior and their actions is considered to be an illusion and a habituated lie. With this stroke, dramatic situations lose all legitimacy as a form through which the world can be described or translated into narrative structures. (19)

Revealing the futility of theatre as psychology, the postdramatic turn reframed the very purpose of theatre, reminding us about its origins in philosophy: a representation of ideas rather than humans, and a search for meaning beyond a mere reflection of individual characters' actions and motivations.

Along our new postdramatic understanding of what character is, we have also experienced a shift in our understanding of other Aristotelian components of drama ("Plot" and "Thought") and dramatic genres ("Tragedy"). While "Plot" is the dramaturgical architectonics of Drama, Aristotle defines "Thought" as "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. [Thought is] found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (Aristotle 2013a). Thought has been the axiomatic kernel of the relationship between theatre and philosophy. Like the classic understanding of a character, the classic understanding of thought has been unpinned by postdramatic dramaturgies, where multiple, contradictory, and deconstructive meta-thoughts vie for meaning and attention in the often synesthetic and acousmatic sensory overload of nonlinear and plotless aesthetic experiences. But postdramatic theatre has shown us that, like character, thought is, fundamentally unstable and performative, or, as Hans-Thies Lehmann ([2013] 2016) put it in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*: "Onstage, no statement ever proves true and no meaning finds expression that might not be devalued by the response that follows" (182). As our sense of character and thought has shifted from stable to unstable, so has our understanding of tragedy and its role at the junction of theatre and philosophy.

Lehmann points out the limited potential of "fixation on dramatic representation," which he argues has been rooted in Hegelian dialectic while ignoring the structural evolution of the dramatic form itself. Rejecting a Hegelianism that would see a progression "from predramatic to dramatic, and then on to postdramatic" (10), Lehmann argues that

the tragic cannot be conceived either as the manifestation of a dialectic or as an intellectual paradox; it also cannot be conceived as an insoluble conflict or "insight" into the necessity of a subjective or world-historical collapse—even though commonplace definitions of the traffic affirm as much. If tragic experience were really thus, then tragedy would indeed be [...] superfluous. It would merely illustrate relations that concepts can grasp much more deeply and fully. Tragic experience is not simply a matter of reflection; it is also a pause in reflection—it is sensory, "blind" (so to speak), and affect-laden all at once; otherwise, it amounts to nothing at all. (10)

Interpreting the tragic as a dramatic conflict limits its true function: to represent something unrepresentable in language. Tragic experience cannot be understood through the characters alone because tragedy is not simply a conflict of ideas but rather an illustration of the impossibility

of dialectic itself. In that sense, Antigone “can be understood as the exemplary figure of tragedy itself” (176). In the text of the play, Lehmann writes, “*having a position at all* become a problem, one elaborated in a complex and contradictory process of dramaturgy and dialogue. The matter does not involve divergent understanding of one law’s priority over another; rather, it concerns incompatible understanding of what a law of commandment actually *is*” (178). The play thus puts into question not just the meaning of specific words, but the entire project of language itself, the tenuous threads of speech acts that produce our perceived reality.

Thus, Lehmann appears to define tragedy as aporia, or as “the possibility of impossibility,” as Derrida (1993, 72) would call it. Derrida (1993) reminds us that “*Diaporeō* is Aristotle’s term; it means ‘I am stuck’ (*dans l’embarras*), I cannot get out, I’m helpless” (13). In his book *Aporotics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency*, the philosopher Nicholas Rescher (2009) defines aporia as “an impasse, a blockage where there is no predictable way to go forward.” Aporia is “a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses” (1). Aporia is when each of our senses tells us something different. Just like in postdramatic theatre where we experience dissociation between varied stimuli (acousmatic sounds and words detached from their meanings), creating a multitude of meanings and meta-Thoughts, so too in *Antigone*, the law means different things to different people in different circumstances. Given the difference between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, the latter achieves in form what the first achieves in language; in both, tragedy functions as aporia. As Lehmann ([2013] 2016) puts it: “the text [of *Antigone*] makes it more than evident that no argument ever ‘hits home’; everything is presented in a twilight state, relativized, and left in (or brought into) suspense” (181). As in aporia, “the *agon* of protagonists—which is essentially mute—precludes the communication of an argument.” As this article has addressed, the play presents multiple arguments and readings, but “[u]ltimately, the text endorses none of these readings” (182).

The dramatic structure of *Antigone* permits multiple interpretations of what the law is. The play doesn’t offer resolution, and its dialectical framework is unclear. Rescher (2009) quotes Protagoras, the founder of Sophism, who famously said that “*anything and everything* that we believed could be argued *for* and *con* with equal cogency” (4). The belief in unknowable truth is popular among philosophers and was most famously theorized by Karl Popper in his 1972 book *Objective Knowledge*. Popper argues that there is no truth as such, and that human societies implicitly understand this: totalitarian regimes that insist on being right must impose their version of truth through force, and whatever is considered to be truth is defined as such through performative metalanguage. This is what happens in *Antigone*, Lehmann ([2013] 2016) notes:

[M]eaning and truth achieve force only in dramaturgy, the varying arrangements and constellations of dialogue, and the rhythm of imagery; all of these components admit interpretation. The performative character of every utterance—including constative statements—make it possible to posit realities without the slightest regard for the truth. (182–183)

The tragedy thus has a dramaturgy of aporia, the sense of being stuck in multiple contradicting performative utterances.

For this very reason, Derrida (1993) notes that Plato's philosophical dialogues often end in aporia, in a place where

*there is no longer any problem.* Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself. (12)

There is no place to go from tragedy: catharsis offers resolution to the past events, but no possible promise of the future. It is perhaps for this reason that grief is an aporic condition. In *Glas*, Derrida notes that Hegelian interpretation of *Antigone* suggests a kind of inherent aporia in the dialectic itself (166). Antigone's negativity is not outside of polis/state/law/ethics, but rather it is part of it, bound by the ties of both dialectic and aporia. In *Aporias*, Derrida drives the point more decisively: "Aristotelian aporia is understood, thought, and assimilated into that which is properly dialectical" (14). We draw a full circle from dialectic to aporia. What is at stake in philosophy's attempt to try to define what tragedy is? There is a tension between tragic form and philosophy's attempt to define it that seems to reveal the tension at the core of philosophy's very *raison d'être*. The many ways of defining tragedy, from dialectic to aporia, is itself an aporic exercise: we don't know what tragedy is, except on the most basic level a mutable dramatic form with Thought that reveals philosophy's biggest secret: that in its search for truth, it essentially searches for what Heidegger calls *Das Nichts*—Nothing, the unanswerable, unknowable mystery of being and non-being.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joan Copjec notes that Hegel's understanding of gender is social and biological, but not sexual. Copjec (2003) writes: "[...] this difference turns out to be, in his reading, only a gender or biological difference, not a sexual one; that is, Antigone and Creon enact a division of labor that is defined sociologically, according to the spaces they are allowed to inhabit and the roles they are encouraged to assume, given their biology" (15).

<sup>2</sup> Following Hegel, George Eliot ([1856] 2019) reiterates that main thesis: "Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with the duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each" (189).

<sup>3</sup> In his book, *Antigone in the Americas: Democracy, Sexuality, and Death in the Settler Colonial Present*, Andrés Fabián Henao Castro (2021) argues that Antigone's migratory status (and Oedipus' migratory status) reveals proto-colonial model of exclusion and supplication: "[W]hat Antigone's coerced migrations between Corinth, Thebes, and Colonus dramatize is the conflictive, triangular organization of political membership between the positionalities of the slave (full exclusion), and the metic (partial inclusion/partial exclusion), and the citizen (full inclusion). Political membership is only intelligible against the logic that relationally sustains these different positionalities" (4). Refocusing the play's central power struggle from the relationships of kinship to that of master and slave dialectic, Castro notes that Antigone's punishment deprives her of her political status (of metic), putting her on par with slaves. Creon can do this to her not only because he is the king, but because she is the other, the foreigner who never truly belongs and can be destroyed without fear of family reprisal. Castro suggests that it is this unequal status, the relationship of master and slave that generates the tragic conflict and that also provides a blueprint for the Western acceptance of colonization and its hierarchies.

<sup>4</sup> Countering that argument, Yannis Stavrakakis (2003) asks: "Can Antigone really be presented as a model for progressive ethico-political action?" if her choices are not connected to broader socio-political order, and her actions are not an effort to alter that order, but are driven by her internal isolation from that order? (118). Stavrakakis writes: "Antigone can only function as a model for *radical* political action on the condition that she is stripped of her radically inhuman (anti-social and anti-political) desire" (119).

However, in her book, *Antigone Interrupted* (2013), Bonnie Honig offers a defense of Antigone as model for political action, noting that Antigone "is a heroine not only of resistance and frank speech (though she tries these too) but also of the open secret, that conspiratorial form of communication whose figure is *adianoeta*" (3). Honig argues that Antigone does, in fact, act on behalf of forces larger than her individual objectives, and therefore she can be viewed as a model of political resistance: "her actions are embedded in and enacted on behalf of forces, structures, and networks larger than the autonomous individual that modern liberals, humanists, and even radical democratic theorists tend to both love (as courageous, heroic) and berate (as anarchic or irresponsible)" (8). Antigone, Honig writes, is not placed outside of the polis looking in, outside of sovereignty but rather she "engages in a politics of counter-sovereignty" (2).

<sup>5</sup> In *Aesthetics*, Hegel establishes the character as the foundation of tragedy (whether by external circumstances, as in Greek tragedy, or by its internal quintessence, as in Romantic characters): "The heroes of ancient classic tragedy discover circumstances under which they, so long as they irrefragably adhere to the one ethical state of pathos which alone corresponds to their own already formed personality, must infallibly come into conflict with an ethical Power which opposes them and possesses an equal ethical claim to recognition. Romantic characters, on the contrary, are from the first placed within a wide expanse of contingent relations and conditions, within which every sort of action is possible; so that the conflict, to which no doubt the external conditions presupposed supply the occasion, essentially abides within the character itself, to which the individuals concerned in their passion give effect, not, however, in the interests of the ethical vindication of the truly substantive claims, but for the simple reason that they are the kind of men they are" (Hegel [1823–1829] 2019, 186).

<sup>6</sup> Different translations of *Poetics* use different terminology, including "appropriate" and "probable." The general notion of the Aristotelian character can be summarized as "true to life"—mimetically reflecting a real-life person, who is plausible and consistent, or "consistently inconsistent" (Aristotle 2013, 20–25).

<sup>7</sup> Although Szondi ([1956] 1987) himself considered Greek drama to be predramatic, since by commenting on the events, the chorus breaks the fourth wall, making the Greek drama not yet absolute, not yet "conscious of nothing outside itself" (8).

<sup>8</sup> In his essay on *Antigone, the play*, Mark Griffith (2010), notes that though Antigone, the character, has a "distinctive 'voice' [which] implies the existence of a distinctive 'character' as well. But we must pause to ask ourselves to what extent it is appropriate, or possible, to identify a single, coherent human personality within the cluster of speech-acts and behaviours associated with a stage figure such as 'Antigone', and what kind of inner life and motivations we are entitled to" (112–113).

<sup>9</sup> In his seminal 1969 book, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, Walter Kauffman considers Antigone's character (her "nature" as a character) to be the impulse behind the entire drama: "Sophocles' Antigone is prompted not by any theology or philosophy but by her nature, her character, her feelings"—taking for granted the very existence of Antigone's "feelings." (She has feelings, ergo she's "true to life"; she's a real human being) (44).

<sup>10</sup> One of the first to note the excessive primacy of character was Yeats, who in a 1910 essay on tragedy found character suitable for comedy but superfluous for tragic drama. In tragedy, Yeats postulates, character dissolves into the lyricism of the elevated language: "One dogma of the printed criticism is that if a play does not contain definite character, its constitution is not strong enough for the stage, and that the dramatic moment is always the contest of character with character" (216); tragic art, however, "distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character" (218).

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## Biography

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## BEING SURFACE

DESPINA ZACHAROPOULOU PERFORMANCE ARTIST / ACADEMIC

**CONTENT WARNING: TEXT & IMAGES CONTAIN ELEMENTS OF VIOLENCE THAT  
MIGHT DISTURB SENSITIVE AUDIENCES.**

### Introduction

This paper problematizes the ways in which performance art might *be* philosophy, and vice versa, that is; how philosophy might operate as embodied praxis and method. The performance practice under discussion stands as the research's starting point, method and output, with all the works brought forward being conceived and performed by myself. However, the deliberate use of a third-person phrasing (e.g. 'the performer', 'the artist') while describing these performances serves as a strategic methodological choice of narration, so as to avoid oversentimentality, egocentrism, and a sense of diary/confession writing, even more so due to the already quite visceral character of the live works presented.

The text's main hypothesis is based on the argument that philosophy, though predominantly thought of as a rational ideological construction, is essentially an invitation towards change and a method on how to lead one's life (Hadot 2001, 148). This position has been particularly stressed by philosophers Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, who revisited ancient Greek philosophy to indicate how embodied practices might operate as methodologies for leading one's life. Hadot approached this question through his research on *practices of indifference* as indicated by the Stoic tradition and early Christian texts (Hadot 2001). As for Foucault, in the late years of his life, he focused on the notion of *parrhēsia* (Greek term indicating a particular kind of courageous truth-telling) as practiced

by Socrates and Diogenes, as well as by the Cynics and early Christian ascetics (Foucault, 2011). The Cynics, who stood as a singular paradigm of *philosophy as a way of life*, instead of writing texts or constructing systematized theoretical dogmas, disrupted the public sphere via their own naked bodies, scandalous corporeal practices and provocative intra-actions (Barad 2007, 33), so as to reveal a *life as scandal* (Foucault 2011, 173–174, 269). Foucault's interest in the Cynics was part of his larger research on a new hermeneutics of the subject (Foucault 2005) inextricably linked with a stylistics of life that would comprise technologies of the body in the form of care of the self and others. It is in that respect that one should look at Foucault's engagement with sadomasochistic practices; as a laboratory (Rabinow 2000, 151) for "the creation of new forms of life" (Rabinow 2000, 164).

In light of the above, this text discusses how performance strategies related to violence might suggest a radical re-thinking and revisiting of philosophy as embodied practice and method towards a life-as-surface, that is; a life experienced in its full intensity and *in pure joy*. Violence in the context of this research is defined as *any force exercised among bodies at the moment of their encounter, with its effect having a severe impact on the bodies upon which it is applied*. The way that violence operates in the live works put forward, differentiates itself from what seems to be at stake in existing examples in the field of performance art discourse, and brings to light alternative points of view than those already argued in the relevant bibliography. For example, Kathy O'Dell, in her book *Contract with the Skin* (1998), grounds her main argument on Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of the written contract established between Severin and Wanda in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870). Deleuze argues that a 'masochistic contract' was set up by Severin to instruct Wanda how to best satisfy his masochistic needs (Deleuze 1989, 20). Unfortunately, Deleuze—and therefore O'Dell—confuses Severin with a masochist, whereas he is basically a slave/submissive, meaning that what he is essentially in need of is not to get as much pain as possible by 'using' Wanda via the contract, but to fully submit to his Mistress/Owner's will. The contract in this case would be but Severin's ethical commitment towards his complete submission to Wanda, not a tool of instruction on his behalf! Starting from this misinterpretation, O'Dell identifies pain practices in 1970s performance art as a sort of 'masochism' that aims at establishing a 'masochistic contract' with the audience. However, such a general categorization, not only is based on a false argument—as already indicated—but is also quite problematic due to its references to psychopathology (Krafft-Ebing 1895), that tend to pathologize pain practices in performance art. The consequences of such a move are not irrelevant to the comments that Marina Abramović received for her early works: "I was nothing but an exhibitionist and a masochist, they said. I belonged in a mental hospital they claimed" (Abramović 2016, 67).

On the contrary, in the live works discussed, pain practices in performance art suggest an alternative view of violence, now operating as a technological apparatus for the generation and distribution of intensities within each work, via the transmutation of the performer's body into *flesh*, stripped of any given subjectivities. In so doing, the performances at stake, manage to operate as fields occupied only by intensities, thus overlapping with Artaud and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the Body without Organs (Artaud 1988, 571; Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 177–8). Therefore, the images created by the performer's postures, movements and/or marks on the

skin, would be but a manifestation of forces traversing the artist's body at any given moment. In this way, the performer essentially takes the risk to reveal—while also protecting—a life which is *radically other*, a life affirmed *as it is* and *as it is lived*, without any ideological or moral presuppositions. Consequently, what is at stake in the performance practice presented, would be an invitation to a new ethical life.

### Philosophy as a way of life

For French Philosopher Pierre Hadot, ancient Greek philosophy was not about the creation of concepts as coherent ideological systems of thought carrying absolute truths. On the contrary, most of ancient Greek philosophers tended to have inconsistencies and contradictions in their texts, not because they had errors and thus failed to create a perfectly consistent theory, but precisely because ancient Greek philosophy was not a system but a *method* that allowed one to see the world differently and change their way of life:

[T]he ancient philosophers weren't looking above all to present a systematic theory of reality, but to teach their students a method in order for them to be equally oriented in their thinking but also in their life. (Hadot 2001, 148, my translation.)

Therefore, for Hadot, Greek philosophy was first and foremost *a set of spiritual exercises* that served as an indication for and an invitation (*protreptic*) to *a true life*, including practices such as: detachment from oneself, surpassing of all dualities, mnemotechny, dialogue, concentration in the present, preparation for death (*preparatio mortis*) and the difficulties of life, confession, meditation, and breathing exercises (Hadot 2001, 114, 119, 145, 146, 149, 153, 252). Ancient Greek philosophy was thus both: (a) a kind of methodology for someone to find the tools and the ways to lead a true life, and (b) true life itself.

Michel Foucault, in his 1983–1984 series of lectures at the Collège de France dedicated to the subject of *parrhēsia*, presented the case of the Cynic scandal as a philosophical example of a true life, *as a life which is radically other* (Foucault 2011, 269–270). For Foucault, the particularity of the Cynics resided in the fact that they had no written texts or a philosophical doctrine to comply to. On the contrary, philosophy for them was literally practiced through their scandalous way of life committed to simplicity, dismissing all material possessions, social conventions and behavioural patterns (Foucault 2011, 270). The Cynic scandal consisted precisely in practicing an extreme form of life that would disrupt the public sphere and stand as a set of parrhēsiastic corporeal practices among the Athenian citizens. Diogenes, being the seminal example of the Cynic life, had no possessions at all, and became well-known for living inside a big urn and wandering in the city while holding a lamp—even during daylight—'looking for humans.' Diogenes used to eat and masturbate in public, seeing no division between the private and the public (Foucault 2011, 171). Whenever other people scorned him he would respond in unexpected ways (e.g. barking at them) that would always serve as a philosophical statement made directly through the body. In that respect, one could argue that the Cynics not only were the most tangible example of *philosophy as a way of life*, but also stood as a predecessor of performance art in the public sphere, as it would

be seen much later on in the political actions of the early twentieth century avant-garde (e.g. Dada), 1960s Happenings, and contemporary performance art.

Foucault's research on a stylistics of life via embodied philosophy did not reside only in his books and lectures, but was also manifested in his own engagement with the San Francisco gay leather scene. It was the quest for new tools of technologies of the self that drove his interest towards practices of pain and violence as a possible means towards a new hermeneutics of the subject (Rabinow 2000, 141–156, 163–173).

### Performance-as-surface

In line with Hadot and Foucault's philosophical enquiries, the performance practice presented here is an attempt to rethink contemporary performance art as philosophy, and to revisit philosophy as embodied practice and method. It does so by resituating performance art as surface: as a field occupied only by intensities. The notion of the surface used here is simultaneously informed by recent scientific investigations such as non-Euclidean geometries employed by super-string theory, but also by modal ontologies and philosophical paradigms suggesting an understanding of the world as a field for the free play of forces.

Surfaces are one-sided topological entities. Examples would include Möbius strips, Klein bottles, and toruses (or 'donuts'), among others. A way to help one visualize such one-sided manifolds circulated by forces would be the fabric of spacetime, as envisioned by Albert Einstein in 1915. For Einstein, spacetime was not an even surface, but it disposed curvatures that shifted and changed in relation to mass-energy concentrations at any given moment. Recent scientific research regarding spacetime and the quest for a unified theory, has led scientists to seek more complex surface models that would refine Einstein's four-dimensional fabric, so as for it to be applicable both in quantum physics (microcosm) and general relativity (macrocosm). One of such types of surfaces would be the Calabi-Yau manifold, as it appears in super-string and M-theory (Greene 2000, 207–9). The Calabi-Yau manifold allows one to start thinking of more complex surfaces than the stretched fabric of spacetime. According to super-string theory, the entirety of the cosmos consists of vibrating loop strings forming a vast matter-energy continuum. Thus argued, the problem of the undecidable nature of elementary units, behaving either as particles or as waves, seems to have found an answer (Holzner 2013, 18). Within this continuous field of vibrating strings, string theorists suggest that spacetime might nest even smaller, 'hidden' dimensions in the form of manifolds, such as that of the Calabi-Yau shape. This decisive hypothesis of potential extra nested dimensions allowed scientists to move even further towards a unified theory, since the vibration of strings within these 'hidden' dimensions would make the same string behave differently once situated in each one of them. This meant that scientists wouldn't have to shift to different systems of reference across different scales; one theory would fit all (Greene 2000, 315). Having said that, what is important for one to grasp, so as to also start visualizing performance art differently, is the cosmos as a continuum of an economy of forces of vibrating matter-energy, channelled via different configurations-topologies that shapeshift in a ceaseless flow. Tensions circulating within these surface topologies may engender folds, creases, and 'valleys,' but also rips

and tears (Greene 2000, 263–4). The dynamic character of surfaces allows them to mutate and shift according to the way that forces are being channelled while inhabiting those surfaces across different directions, in various intensities and nomadic distributions. Surfaces might not only change shape, but they might also generate new singularities or even new surfaces from the singularities produced. Whether all these scientific theories are proven to be correct or not, the consequences of these complex conceptions of surface are enormous for the way that one might start grasping the world and performance art. From now on, one would be able to start looking at live art in terms such as: circulation, forces, groundlessness, morphogenesis, duration, multiple singularities, and singular multiplicities.

Philosophers such as: Spinoza, Sade, Nietzsche, Lyotard, Klossowski, Bataille, Deleuze, Barad, Golding, and others, have articulated a discourse away from metaphysics and essential categories, and have suggested paradigms of the world seen as a dynamic field of forces. The “image of thought” (Deleuze 2004, 171–221) represented by the aforementioned thinkers would often be visualized as skin, surface, or plane, conveying the idea of a continuum inhabited by intensities. In Lyotard’s case, this would be a “great ephemeral skin,” a one-dimensional libidinal surface and/or a Möbius strip that would result after spreading open the body’s surface (Lyotard 1993, 19–58). It is in a similar way that Johnny Golding in her text “Pariah Bodies” saw the vast libidinal network of sexual entanglements within the gay and lesbian community as a shared skin (Golding 1996, 172). In Spinoza’s case the world would be visualized as a “plane of immanence,” an idea that would strongly influence Deleuze’s thought as well (Deleuze 1988, 122). Affinities could also be found with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the “rhizome,” described in their work *Mille Plateaux* (1980) as an entity “with no beginning or end” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 26). It is in the same book that the two philosophers revisited Artaud’s idea of the Body without Organs (BwO), thus offering another way to visualize the idea of the surface:

[...] the BwO is not a scene, a place or even a support upon which something comes to pass. [...] It is not space nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree—to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 177–8).

The live works presented in this text invoke surface topologies both as a new spatio-temporal paradigm and as an onto-epistemological move that would allow performance art to be seen as an *economy of circulation of intensities*, echoing in a sense the way that Klossowski envisioned the world as a ceaseless ‘exchange of impulsive forces’ happening against one’s sense of unified self:

[...] these exchanges cannot take place without leaving behind traces or ‘notations’ of what has been extracted and exchanged. The phantasm is indebted to the organism just as the pleasure or pain experienced by the individual are indebted to the phantasm that procures them for the individual. This is the ‘debit balance’ [*solde débiteur*] of individual unity. (Klossowski 2017, 62)

Therefore, the hypothesis adopted would be as follows: in order for performance art to operate as surface, it would be necessary for the performer’s body to abolish all given subjectivities via its

transmutation into *flesh*, into matter inhabited only by intensities. This is precisely the role of violence in the performance practice at stake; to operate as a mechanism that would turn the performer's body into *flesh*, build and distribute a nexus of forces within the work.

### Works of violence

Following from violence's definition as *any force exercised among bodies at the moment of their encounter, with its effect having a severe impact on the bodies upon which it is applied*, the works of violence brought forward could then be distinguished into two further subcategories of performances: (a) performances in which violence takes place at a time prior to the performer's appearance in front of an audience, and (b) works in which violence takes place during the 'actual' performance, either live or in a video format reproducing an action that has already happened in the past (during a performance piece or within a private consensual environment). In the first subcategory (a), violence is presented either through marks left on the performer's body as a trace/remainder, e.g.: bruises, imprints, and/or abrasions, or is implied through rituals of care that would constitute the 'actual' performance work, called upon to manage violence's traumatic remainder.



*Image 1: Despina Zacharopoulou, Corner Time, 7-week (324 hours) long durational performance, commissioned by the NEON Organization and the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), AS ONE, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, 10 March–24 April 2016. Photograph by Kyveli Dragoumi.*

*Corner Time* (2016) would be a performance belonging simultaneously to both subcategories of works just described, since, due to its long duration (8 hours per day / 6 days per week / for 7 weeks / 324 hours in total), any scenes of violence, performed mainly through Japanese bondage techniques (shibari/kinbaku), sometimes took place in front of the public, while others not, depending on whether there were any visitors in the performance space at that particular moment. Depending on each bondage scene's duration, intensity, and area of application, it was often the case to have rope marks on the performer's skin, thus testifying the preceding event of restriction to those members of the public who entered the space after the 'actual' event of violence was over.



*Image 2: Despina Zacharopoulou, Corner Time, 7-week (324 hours) long durational performance, commissioned by the NEON Organization and the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), AS ONE, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, 10 March–24 April 2016. Photograph by Christina Bratuska.*

Given the phrase 'severe impact' in the adopted definition of violence above, it would be necessary to investigate how this severe impact gets manifested in the performances discussed. In the following examples of works, this impact would be usually read via its *residual expressions* that constitute proof, testimony, and memory of the event of violence. Such residual expressions would include:

1. The intensities produced and distributed in the work, accompanied by the production of images of a body *in spasm* assuming positions and generating images that would be impossible to be engendered without the application of forces on the performer's body and without the mediation of pain. This position would be similar to the way that Francis Bacon looked at violence and became interested in bodies in spasm:

The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through it passes, the domains it traverses [...]. (Deleuze 2019, 30)

"[...] what interests Bacon is not exactly movement [...] it is a movement 'in place,' a spasm, which reveals a completely different problem characteristic of Bacon: the action of invisible forces on the body (hence the bodily deformations, which are due to this more profound cause). (Deleuze 2019, 31)



*Image 3. Despina Zacharopoulou, Introduction, 20-minute performance, 2015, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, UK. Ropes: Fred Hatt. Video Still. Camera: Jeroen Van Dooren.*

2. The creation of marks on the performer's skin, such as: imprints, bruises, abrasions, or even breakings of the skin tissue (e.g. using body stapling).



*Image 4. Despina Zacharopoulou, Love \*me\*, 5-minute performance, 5 MINUTES OF YOUR TIME, RCA Performance Pathway, The doodle bar, London, UK, 2017. Photograph by Prof. Nigel Rolfe.*

3. Rituals of care following the effects and affects of the violent forces exerted at a time prior to the performance work, including their residue-as-trauma.



*Image 5. Despina Zacharopoulou, Aftercare I, 3-day (20 hours) long durational performance, RCA Fine Art Research Exhibition: MATTER, Royal College of Art, 2016. Photograph by Janina Anja Lange.*

Regarding those performance works where the audience encounters a marked body, the viewer seems to ethically oscillate, not knowing exactly where to place themselves towards the artist. In this case, the audience cannot really discern whether they should feel sorry for the performer, protect her, feel threatened or excited by this *body-flesh* inhabited only by intensities, that are then channelled inside the work as a nexus of hedonism, trauma, abandonment, availability and indifference.

### **Being a threat**

*Being a threat* (2016) was the first performance in a series of works of marks. The performer, having her entire body covered except her back, was crawling along the perimeter of the gallery, her face turned against the wall or the floor. The marked back, left exposed to the audience, was full of whip marks caused the night before by third parties within a consensual environment. During the performance, the artist's back became her 'face.' For two hours her body slid slowly and sensuously along the perimeter of the exhibition space. However, the body presented to the audience was not a victimized body; it was a piece of traumatized and hedonistic flesh, a body that seemed to be floating within a surface circulated only by intensities. Once the performer reached the gallery's exit, then, quasi-human and quasi-animal, she got up and left the space.



*Image 6. Despina Zacharopoulou, Being A Threat, 2-hour performance, Performing Identities, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, UK, 2016. Photograph by Ania Mokrzycka.*



*Images 7 and 8. Despina Zacharopoulou, Being A Threat, 2-hour performance, Performing Identities, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, UK, 2016. Photographs by Ania Mokrzycka.*

## Affectability / Vulnerability

Using *Being a threat* (2016) as an example, one might wonder what the difference might be between a performance that requires a repeated exercise of violence on the performer's body as part of the work's preparation, and a performance where the artist would execute the same trajectory and movements in space without the violence preceding it. Should violence not precede the action, the result would be a body simply navigating the exhibition space, with the project being exclusively about the gallery's habitation by the performer.

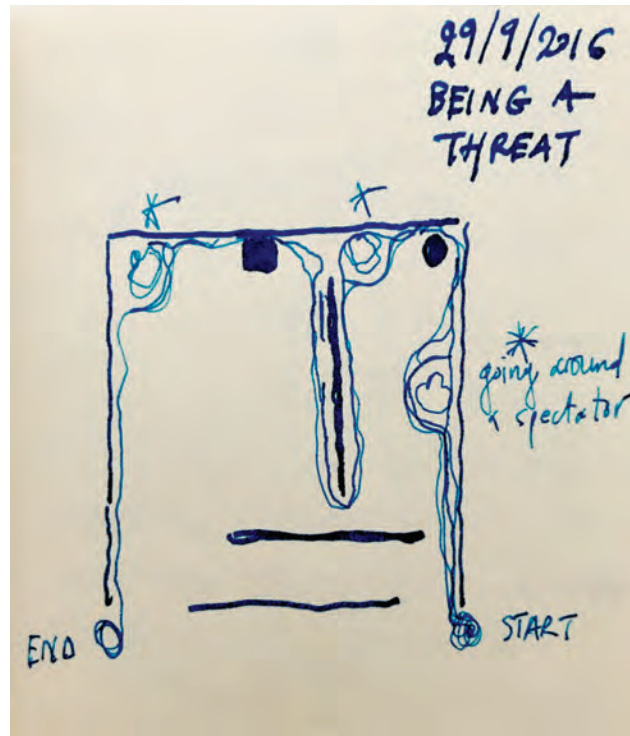


Image 9. Despina Zacharopoulou, Diagram (*Being A Threat*), ink on paper, 104x146 mm, 2016.

However, should violence be part of the performer's preparation for the work, the marks on the body would indicate the existence of forces already exerted upon the artist, producing and distributing intensities during the performance. In this case, the testimony of a body that had been affected by and marked during its encounter with other bodies, would indicate *the ability of this body to affect and be affected by other bodies and forces*. This ability would be named as *affectability* or *vulnerability*. What is at stake here is a body presented to the viewer that is open to be affected by and affect other bodies; it is a vulnerable body, a body ready to accept any touch, no matter how violent or even traumatic that touch might be.

It is under this perspective of affectability that the performances *Love \*me\** (2017), *D'après S.K* (2017), and *Response-ability (d'après K.B.)* (2017) should be regarded. In all three cases the performer had her thighs and buttocks caned the night before, within a consensual environment. Regardless of the differences among the three live works, the main idea was the same: dividing the action in

two stages, with the first one performed in clothes and the second one while being partially or fully naked to expose the cane marks on her body. What is essentially at stake across this series of works of marks is the performer's ability to exhibit a vulnerable and sensuous body affirming life *as it is*.



*Image 10. Despina Zacharopoulou, D'après S.K, 10-minute performance, Tender Loin #9, Steakhouse Live, Toynbee Studios, London, UK, 2017. Photograph by Greg Goodale.*



*Image 11. Despina Zacharopoulou, D'après S.K, 10-minute performance, Tender Loin #9, Steakhouse Live, Toynbee Studios, London, UK, 2017. Photograph by Greg Goodale.*

## Repetition as feedback loop

Repetition is a condition of action before it is a concept of reflection.

Deleuze (2004, 117)

Across all the works of violence presented, repetition is manifested in the reiteration of consensual violent acts upon the performer's body, either during or before each performance. Repetition, here, is not to be understood as a repetition of "the identical" (Deleuze 2014, 319), but as both the visible and invisible work within each performance piece, characterized by the recurring exercise of forces upon the performer's body. These forces could be exerted either prior to the 'actual work,' by other people within a consensual environment (e.g. caning, whipping, bondage), or by the artist herself or third parties during a performance piece (e.g. body stapling, bondage, caning). Throughout this range of works of violence, each performance work is essentially *the remainder/excess* of an ever-going repetition of forces that keeps circulating from project to project in the form of a feedback loop, as indicated by Mandelbrot's set:

$$z \Rightarrow z^2 + c$$



*Image 12: Despina Zacharopoulou, Aftercare I, 3-day (20 hours) long durational performance, RCA Fine Art Research Exhibition: MATTER, Royal College of Art, 2016. Photograph by Janina Anja Lange.*

If  $z$  stands for step 1 within a morphogenetic process, and  $z^2$  stands for the repetition of step 1, then step 2 not only contains the repetition of  $z$ , but also a sort of excess or residue  $c$ , which stands for the very morphogenetic process itself during the realization of the passage from step 1 to step

2. The symbol  $\rightleftharpoons$  stands for the phenomenon of the feedback loop. Its double direction indicates that every step within a feedback loop always already includes its own process of (future and past) becoming, in the form of a remainder from all previous realized stages. It would also be fair to argue that Mandelbrot's set also coincides with Lyotard's use of the French term *circonversion* [metaconversion] as "[...] the condensed 'powers' of conversion without upper limit, since any case of  $M^1$  is also a case of  $M^2...M^n$ " (Lyotard 2015, xv). Consequently, Mandelbrot's set, also written as  $f_c(z) = z^2 + c$  (Douady, Adrien, and Hubbard 1985, 37–72), indicates that for each value of  $z$ , a singularity governed by the type  $f_c(z) = z^2 + c$  gets produced. In the works of violence, this singularity would be the actualization and the solidification of forces in a single form, as they appear at any given moment. Lyotard's idea of 'metaconversion' as well as Mandelbrot's set showcase a repetitive process, in which every round simultaneously superimposes its own past and future in a form of a multiplicity or fractal (Mandelbrot 1973) that already includes its own morphogenetic processes and excesses.

This idea of excess positions the present paper within a lineage of thought (e.g. Nietzsche, Bataille, Spinoza, Deleuze, etc.) that saw the repetition of violence as a necessary move to attack universalism and the kingdom of Reason. However, in Bataille's focus on the notion of unconditional expenditure (Bataille 1985, 116–129), as manifested in sacrificial rites, rituals of destruction, and eroticism, violence was seen as a means to transgress certain taboos imposed by religion/society (Bataille 2012, 32–36). Whereas in the context of this research, what is basically at stake is the reiteration of violence without presupposing a certain form of prohibition or ground. That is, *repetition in performance art*—and consequently, repetition of violence in performance art—*is here examined as a certain process of revisiting a state of pure becoming*, in the same way that Klossowski grasped Nietzsche's idea of Eternal Return as a return to the world of the Will to Power:

It is not the fact of being there that fascinates Nietzsche in this moment, but the fact of returning in what becomes: this necessity—which was lived and must be relived—defies the will and the creation of a meaning. (Klossowski [1969] 1997, 65)



*Image 13. Despina Zacharopoulou, Corner Time, 7-week (324 hours) long durational performance, commissioned by the NEON Organization and the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), AS ONE, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, 10 March–24 April 2016. Photograph by Panos Kokkinias.*

For example, in *Corner Time* (2016), the performer was repeatedly using the materials of rope and chalk upon her own body for eight hours per day within the course of seven weeks (324 hours in total), through techniques such as those of: Japanese rope bondage (shibari / kinbaku), restriction, isolation of the senses, suffocation, immobility, or non-stop movement. During the seven weeks that the performance lasted, and on a daily basis, some of the spectators took the initiative to enter into an encounter with the artist, mainly through the gaze or touch. As a result, apart from the performer's application of forces upon her own body, she had also been repeatedly tied up, untied, hugged, kissed, caressed, and/or touched by members of the audience. It was via all of these recurring actions that the artist's body was allowed to dismiss any given subjectivities and get transmuted into *flesh*.

Abolishing any sense of unified self and transmutating one's body into flesh was also the purpose of all the consensual whippings or canings that the performer had to endure as a preparation for her works of marks. In the cases of performances of care, this was attained by the repetition of rituals of care aimed to manage violence's residue in the form of trauma, resulting from preceding long durational work(s).



*Image 14. Despina Zacharopoulou, Aftercare II, 1-hour performance, BEING DOING, RCA Performance Pathway, Asylum Caroline Gardens Chapel, 2016. Photograph by Prof. Nigel Rolfe.*

## Trauma

*If trauma is the persistent ongoing recurrence in the present, of violent impacts of bodies on other bodies at the moment of their encounter, then trauma can only continue to exist as trace and excess, circulating in the form of currency.* In the works of violence, trauma continues to circulate, as ‘the secret’ (Kierkegaard, 1843) that renders them with meaning, sometimes making its presence more explicit, others remaining to ‘haunt’ the work as a ‘ghost.’ Through the constant repetition of violent acts and intense intra-actions, trauma would always be the residue that keeps circulating in the projects to come. How can contemporary performance art manage trauma? Does this move imply any kind of morality or ethics?

According to psychoanalysis, mourning and depression would be the two main ways of managing trauma, categorizing the former under the moral definition of normality and the latter under the accusation of psychopathology. In Sigmund Freud’s emblematic text “Mourning and Melancholia,” the father of psychoanalysis located the source of melancholy in the ego’s autophagic attack towards itself, as a gesture of anger resulting from an accusation that could not be addressed to its actual recipient, which would be the lost object of desire (Freud 2005, 203). Trauma in this case would be seen as a sort of wound, marked by a severe loss that could not be recuperated, leaving the acceptance of loss through mourning as the only ‘healthy’ way to recover from it.

For Melanie Klein, trauma and melancholy characterize all human beings *in statu nascendi*, since birth itself and the newborn’s dependence on the maternal breast, followed by its forced detachment after a few months’ time, inevitably lead to primary melancholy for the loss of the most desired object, which is the mother’s body (Klein 1975, 306–343). For Klein, it is the beginning of our lives that is itself traumatic and needs to be repaired along the stages of one’s psychic development, otherwise melancholy might persist in adult life as well, should the initial trauma repeat under other patterns of attachments and detachments (Klein 1975, 307). In this way, it becomes clear that for psychoanalysis, trauma not only would be situated in the past, condemned to be always inaccessible by memory, but would be also regarded as a wound that needs to be healed.

The present paper offers an alternative view on trauma, as suggested in the performances at stake, where *trauma is seen as a driving force that needs to be repeated again and again so as to allow one to experience life as pure becoming.* In the live works presented, repetition of trauma through events of violence or rituals of care does not offer any redemption in order to create *performer-heroes*, nor any fixation for the production of *performer-victims*. What takes place and gives meaning to each work, after constituting itself as a kind of ‘groundless ground’ (Braver, 2014), would be the repetition of trauma so that the performer dismisses all subjectivities. In this way, trauma would no longer be placed in the past as a primary wound or as an immobile, untouchable reference point, but would instead be looked at as a dynamic multiplicity of events, fluid and susceptible to transmutation via processes of repetition. This process of the trauma’s eternal return through a ceaseless reiteration of acts of violence and of intense intra-actions among bodies, would not

constitute a repetition of “the identical,” but a *repetition as difference* in the way that Deleuze defined difference (1968) and Nietzsche grasped the event of eternal return (1881):

Nietzsche meant nothing more than this by eternal return. Eternal return cannot mean the return of the identical, because it presupposes a world (that of the will to power) in which all previous identities have been abolished and dissolved. Returning is being, but only the being of becoming. The eternal return does not bring back “the same” but returning constitutes the only Same of that which becomes. Returning is the becoming-identical of becoming itself. Returning is thus the only identity, but identity as secondary power; the identity of difference, the identical which belongs to the different, or turns around the different. Such an identity produced by difference, is determined as “repetition.” Repetition is the eternal return, therefore consists in conceiving the same on the basis of the different. [...] Only the extreme, the excessive returns [...]. (Deleuze 2014, 52–53)

Repetition, once seen as eternal return to trauma, manages to resituate trauma away from its psychoanalytic understanding as a primary loss and rethink it as “corporeal trace” (Spinoza 1996, 44) or “phantasm” (Klossowski 2017, 7); as an obsessive image-multiplicity of past, present, and future encounters among bodies that keeps returning. Therefore, trauma grasped through difference and repetition now becomes a non-originary entity that keeps circulating at the moment it returns, and in so doing to define identity as difference and pure becoming.

### **Violence as an apparatus for the fabrication of the Body without Organs (BwO)**

Deleuze and Guattari in their analysis on the BwO explain potential different methodologies (*programs*) followed for the fabrication of one’s BwO, e.g. masochism, love-making, drug use, schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 179). Whatever the case, what seems to be always involved in the BwO’s fabrication, would be repetition, selection, rhythm, disarticulation, experimentation, and nomadism (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 185). In the works of violence brought forward, the program for the fabrication and maintenance of the BwO would be defined by the *technology* of the implements inflicting pain upon the performer’s body (e.g. cane, single tail, body stapler, rope). Each implement would produce different kinds of rhythm, intensities, and sensations of pain—sometimes deeper (cane), others more acute (single tail). The tools exercising violence would be “*flow-producing machines*,” with the performer’s body being a “*flow-interrupting machine*,” creating cuts/incisions in the received energy flows (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 16). Then these cuts/incisions would be visualized and manifested through marks on the performer’s skin. By the end of the performance the artist would be a “great ephemeral skin” (Lyotard 1993, 19–57), projecting traumas and pleasures; a multiplicity of violations and healings, a tangible residue of the forces exercised upon her.



Image 15. Despina Zacharopoulou, *Surface, performance for the camera, Live 2 Camera II, RCA Performance Pathway, 2017*. Video still. Camera: J. J. Rolfe.

### Parrhēsia

In the performances discussed, there is always a risk to be taken by the performer, while bringing herself exposed and vulnerable in front of the audience. This risk is absolutely necessary so that these performances may function as *fields of truth* “bringing things forth” (Heidegger 2011, 222). However, the term ‘truth’ should not be seen here as a universal concept of moral value, nor should it be confused with the logical veridiction of propositions as expressed by the true/false binary. After all, the misinterpretations and pitfalls to which such an identification of the idea of truth could lead, have already been stressed out by many philosophers, such as Wittgenstein and Deleuze (Wittgenstein 2005, 188–189, Deleuze 2013, 19). On the contrary, the notion of truth as approached in the works presented, is seen as that which emerges and circulates, in the form of currency, during events of *parrhēsiastic games*. According to Michel Foucault, parrhēsia (or parrhēsiastic truth) may emerge as soon as:

a) one exhibits their life as a *true life* which is *radically other*, and in so doing they expose—though *in bashfulness*—both themselves and their life in public view (Foucault 2011, 173–4). This move, once performed, puts the parrhēsiast in danger, not only of breaking the relationship with their interlocutors, but also of risking his/her own life.

b) one stands with an ‘openness of heart’ before the Master and, consequently, before others as well (Christian ascetic tradition) (Foucault 2011, 328–9 ). The risk, here, is directly connected with the leap of faith that one has to perform while submitting to the Master and Their will, without knowing whether they will be safe.

The performer-parrhēsiast, the moment of their encounter with the audience, is able to reveal an example of a life which is *radically other*; a *life-as-surface*, a life which is at the same time voluptuous

and traumatic, and which despite the fear and trembling, can only be experienced in its full intensity and *in pure joy*. It is precisely all these contradictions governing *life-as-surface* that do not allow it to be described through its segments without it being degenerated. So the only way to indicate this sort of life is by simultaneously exposing and protecting it; hence the role of *bashfulness* in the process of revealing *life as surface*.

Søren Kierkegaard in his work *Fear & Trembling* (1843), used the term 'secret' to describe the attunement taking place between God and Abraham, which is similar to that between the performer and the audience described here, the moment that *life-as-surface* is being exposed. *Attunement* between Abraham and God is something that cannot be said, because it is precisely inscribed within the realm of faith, presupposing the moves of "infinite resignation" and the "reposition in the strength of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, 1985, 51). It is in a similar way, that Nietzsche, in *Gay Science (Gaia Scienza, 1881)* called forth the preservation of the veil protecting Truth/Nature, against its indistinguishable exposure to light, the moment it is revealed:

[...] We no longer believe that truth remains truth when one pulls off the veil; [...] One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—Baubo?.. Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity! [...] Are we not just in this respect—Greeks? Worshippers of shapes, tones, words? And therefore—artists? (Nietzsche 2001, 8–9.)

### Pudeur / Bashfulness

In *Pudeur (d'après F.N.)* (2017) and *Pudeur II (d'après F.N.)* (2018), the artist, after removing her clothes in front of the spectators, read aloud and in its entirety Nietzsche's aforementioned aphorism, while, at the same time, she was stapling her nipples and genitals.

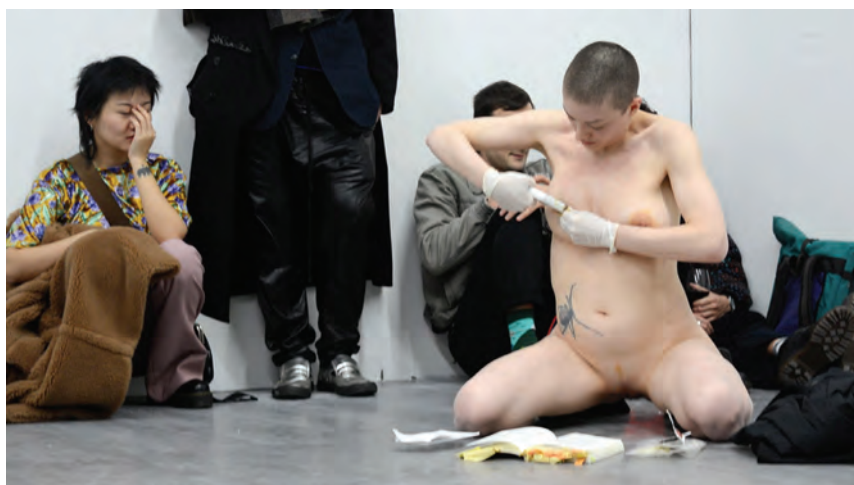


Image 16. Despina Zacharopoulou, *Pudeur (d'après F.N.)*, 10-minute performance, *The New Darkroom*, RCA Queer Society, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, 2017. Text by Friedrich Nietzsche, *La Gaia Scienza*, 1882, Preface §4, transl. by Patrick Wotling, slightly altered by Pierre Hadot, as mentioned in: Pierre Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de Nature*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 22–23. Photograph by Vasiliki Antonopoulou.

*Pudeur (d'après F.N.)* (2017) and *Pudeur II (d'après F.N.)* (2018), started from the performer's need to 'seal' her body after being heartbroken. Her inability to directly communicate the intensity of her emotional pain without falling into banality and cliché defined her aesthetic decisions for the project; first of all she decided to staple her nipples and genitals, two erogenous zones, so as to 'exclude' any external triggers and 'protect' her body. This was definitely a non-verbal statement, an act of resistance, commitment, and grief, in her attempt to share her emotional pain with the audience. At the same time, this act of resistance was performed with pride and strength, not leaving any space for her potential victimization. The impossibility of verbally expressing her pain led the artist to read this particular philosophical text written by Nietzsche on the theme of Nature's bashfulness. In parallel with the act of body-stapling, the difficulty of the—mostly—English-speaking audience to access the text that was being read in French, added to the non-representational character of the performance. What was achieved with this multiverse move was the generation and distribution of intensities through the synergy of multiple singularities that mutated and shifted within the work. This delicate gesture was possible in the first place, precisely due to the artist's decision to create a work about her emotional pain without illustrating it.



*Image 17. Despina Zacharopoulou, Pudeur II (d'après F.N.), 10-minute performance & video projection [Despina Zacharopoulou, Pudeur (d'après F.N.), 10-minute performance, 2017. Camera by Vasiliki Antonopoulou.], Visual Cultures Lecture Series, Marl: Sometimes Hard, usually Soft: A Carnival of Entanglement, Gory Lecture Theatre, RCA, London, UK, 2018. Photograph by Åsa Johannesson.*

Whereas the first version of the performance took place in a gallery with the audience being very close to the performer in a fairly intimate environment, in the second version of this work the performance took place on the stage of an amphitheater, in front of a much larger crowd compared to the first time, with the spectators already seated once the performance started, thus creating a frontal relationship with the artist. In this second case, the performer decided to project the first version of the work right behind her and repeat the same action without having visual contact with what appeared on the screen. Though it soon became obvious, through a certain kind of exchange, that the live action referenced what was taking place in the video, and vice versa, due to the impossibility of completely identifying the one with the other, a 'thick materiality' circulating between the two, as a sort of 'ghost,' essentially constituted the work per se. The 'actual' work was situated neither on the stage nor inside the screen: it was the 'ghost,' the 'difference' that kept circulating to 'haunt' the project, with this 'ghost' being the trauma that was allowed to circulate because of the repetition of the event of violence on stage.

### Image-as-corporeal trace

In *Being a threat* (2016), the pulsating images produced by the artist's bodily contractions and extensions created an image-multiplicity as they became superimposed with the image of the performer's marked back. The exhibited whip marks exposed the forces already exerted upon the artist's body by third parties, within a consensual environment and at a time prior to the performance. The technology of the whip used, by governing the rhythm, the density, the disparity, and the depth of the abrasions created, determined the morphogenetic processes for the images produced and exposed to the eyes of the public. Such trace-images as those produced in *Being a threat* (2016) would be named as 'corporeal traces', echoing, in a sense, the way that Spinoza grasped the idea of the image in his modal ontology:

V. When a fluid part of the human body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against [the fluid part]. (Spinoza 1996, 44)

[...] the images of things are the very affections of the human body, or modes by which the human body is affected by external causes, and disposed to do this or that. (Spinoza 1996, 87)

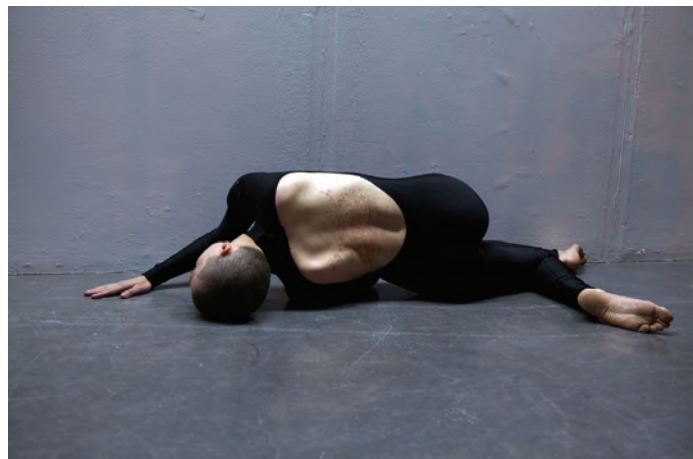


Image 18. Despina Zacharopoulou, *Being A Threat*, 2-hour performance, *Performing Identities*, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, UK, 2016. Photograph by Ania Mokrzycka.

Following the Spinozian image-body entanglement, one could investigate the multivarious ways in which *images-as-affects* (Spinoza 1996, 163) might be generated in the performances presented:

- a) Through the images produced by the performer and which might function as affects upon the spectators' bodies.
- b) Through the traumatic images registered as *trace-affects* upon the performer's body, that would keep producing new images within feedback loops.
- c) Through the images generated by the physical affects of the spectators on the performer's body.



*Image 19. Despina Zacharopoulou, Corner Time, 7-week (324 hours) long durational performance, commissioned by the NEON Organization and the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), AS ONE, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, 10 March–24 April 2016.. Photograph by Natalia Tsoukala.*

### Manifestation of forces

Conscious Man as Middle Point Between Systole and Diastole.

Aby Warburg Notes on the Kreuzlingen Lecture, 1923 (Michaud 2004, 300)

In all the cases brought forward, the nexus of intensities running through the performer's body gets to be manifested via *images-as-affects*, crystallized in the form of marks, movements, and/or body deformations. After adopting Heidegger's hypothesis that the work of art is a kind of *rift* [Riß] through which pulsating forces spring out like a jet/fountain of truth, to reveal things at the moment it protects them (Heidegger 2011, 121), then the works of violence at stake should function as loci for truth to be exposed. This happens precisely because performance-as-surface allows truth to spring out from the conflict taking place the moment images get produced, thus maintaining truth's violent character.



*Image 20. Despina Zacharopoulou, Aphorism, 7-minute live performance & video projection, Entanglement - The Opera, Gorvy Lecture Theatre, RCA, 2019. Text read during the performance: Friedrich Nietzsche, "Of the Despisers of the Body," in: Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, transl. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1961, 2003 [Chemnitz: Ernst Schmeitzner, 1883]), 61–63. Photograph by This is tomorrow.*

At this point it would be necessary to clarify the nature of these orgiastic forces in relation to the philosophical references invoked in the text. Having identified areas of overlap with Heidegger's work regarding the role of the double concealment-revelation of truth within the work of art, it would be important to separate this paper's position from the originary quality assigned to truth by the German philosopher. Truth, as mentioned here, is not meant to be pre-existing, calling one to bring it to light as if they were conducting an archaeological excavation. In the performances examined, the event of truth takes place in the moment that bodies intra-act; it is about a trans-physical field of forces circulating through the repetition of trauma in the form of a feedback loop once forces are exercised upon bodies. However, this process should not be conceived of as a revival of an original event that happened in the past, now resuscitated for therapeutic purposes, but as a reconfiguration of both the present and the past in a form of a multiplicity, through the process of eternal return. Revelation and concealment, in this case, should not be seen as a form of a binary move, but as a vibrating signal resulting from the systoles and diastoles of a pulsating surface inhabited by heterogeneous forces. If Nietzsche saw in eternal return the mobilization of Dionysian forces through their conflict with Apollonian elements, it was because he grasped the necessity of the continuation of the circulation of these forces that dismember and disperse every kind of totality, proving that *what survives within the course of eternal return is not the imitation of forms but only tensions and differences* (Klossowski 1997, 43–44). All these affinities between the works of violence presented with philosophies that celebrate the free play of forces could not leave out the Sadean image of the body as a manifestation of intensities in an orgiastic dance, marking a crucial move of resistance against representation within the history of aesthetics.

## Sade: exiting representation

Klossowski's reading of the Marquis de Sade's *120 days of Sodom* showed how the figure of the libertine/pervert sought to sustain the circulation of intensities via the obsessional repetition of carnal debauchery, so as to attack normality through the "redistribution of functions" for the construction of a "sensuous polymorphy":

[...] the pervert thus observed and documented does behave essentially as a maniac. He subordinates his pleasure to the performing of one sole gesture. (Klossowski 1991, 22)

The pervert [...] seems to formulate by his gesture a definition of existence and a sort of judgement put on existence. (Klossowski 1991, 23)

Annie Le Brun, author specializing in Sade since 1986 and curator of the exhibition *Sade: Attaquer le soleil* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 14/10/2014–25/01/2015), in an interview with *Éditions de Beaux Arts* magazine, argued that the key question posed through Sade's work is that of the unrepresentable:

Starting with the image of the body. How to illustrate these forces that agitate us, desire, violence, that which is called evil? (Le Brun 2014, 4)

In Sade's literary works the body appears surrendered to all kinds of pleasure and cruelty, without limit. His heroes indulge in all sorts of sexual practices and extreme tortures, without end, as if they had to operate accumulatively to create an excess able to circulate and renew as soon as acts of pleasure and violence continue with increasing intensity, with more and more people participating in them (Klossowski, 1991, 108). By distinguishing sodomy as the most blasphemous act against Christian morality—since it does not recognize gender, nor can it lead to childbearing, and therefore cannot serve the family institution—Sade spoke of *the death of God* and of *the revaluation of all values*, long before Nietzsche did (Klossowski 1991, 24). The French writer should not, however, be confined by his readers to a mere opponent of religion, but should be recognized as a philosopher of excess.



Image 21. Despina Zacharopoulou, *Love \*me\**, 5-minute performance, *5 MINUTES OF YOUR TIME*, RCA Performance Pathway, The doodle bar, London, UK, 2017. Photograph by Prof. Nigel Rolfe.

## Hysteria

In the Sadean universe the combination of pain and pleasure allows a kind of *calm spasmodic Beauty* to emerge through bodies not entrenched in boundaries, but dismembered, pierced, and used in all possible ways. These bodies, fully submitted and under the influence of various kinds of forces, are in constant tension, adopting twisted and contorted postures, in such ways that are not far from Jean-Martin Charcot's well-known photographic studies on hysterical patients in crisis. Charcot led the study of hysteria at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century and used the technology of photography of his time to capture the traces of hysteria on the body of patients. Despite the questionable scientific value of Charcot's methods, his visual legacy is essentially *a study of the human body in spasm while traversed by impossible forces* taking over its formations and movements to produce a whole spectrum of images.

For Charcot the origin of hysteria was due to some kind of inherited degeneration, whereas for Freud (who was Charcot's student and attended his—almost theatrical—lectures in Salpêtrière's amphitheater) hysteria was due to some kind of repressed primary trauma, necessarily of a sexual nature, most likely abuse (Freud 1989, 100). For the father of psychoanalysis, as can be deduced from his text "Zur Ätiologie der Hysterie" ("The Aetiology of Hysteria," 1896), hysterical symptoms are to be seen as bodily manifestations of an obsessive repetition of trauma which, after being repelled into the unconscious, cannot be verbally expressed (Freud 1989, 106).



Image 22. Despina Zacharopoulou, *Response-ability* (d'après K.B.), 2-hour performance, *Asylum Live, Daybreak RCA Research Show, Asylum Caroline Gardens, London, UK, 2017*. Photograph by Monika Kita.

However, repetition of trauma in the performances presented should not be grasped as a compulsive revisiting (“acting out”) of a primary violent experience not “[...] fully integrated into the psycho-somatic condition,” nor as its therapeutic “working through” —a set of arguments often employed in contemporary discourse on the relationship between trauma and performance art (Haughton 2018, 169–174). What is suggested, instead, is that the *performance-surfaces* discussed use the repetition of violence and the recurrence of trauma as technological tools for the generation of meaning and the distribution of intensities within each performance work. It is through this feedback loop that trauma keeps circulating as an obsessive image (phantasm) to then be crystallized in transient aesthetic forms via the artist’s vocabulary.



*Image 23. Despina Zacharopoulou, Introduction, 20-minute performance, 2015, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, UK. Ropes: Fred Hatt. Digital layering of video stills. Camera: Jeroen Van Dooren.*

### **Towards a new ethics of care**

To conclude, the performance practice brought forward suggests a radical revisiting of philosophy as embodied praxis and method, via technologies of violence that serve as mechanisms for the transmutation of the performer’s body into flesh, and the production and distribution of intensities within each live work. In so doing, violence and its manifestations claim a particular role and mark a radical territory of investigation within the artistic practice and philosophical tradition, which is quite different from what was at stake in the 1970s performance tradition, where violence mainly served as a means to expand one’s physical and mental limits (Abramović 2016, 71), revive rituals of transgression (e.g. Hermann Nitsch’s *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, 1962 onwards), and/or

criticize the audience's passive response to the socio-political phenomena of the time (O'Dell 1998, 60). Compared to performance artists (e.g. Ron Athey) that use violence in their work as a manifestation of contemporary sacredness leading one to ecstatic transgression (Johnson 2013), or as a way to reclaim one's sick body (O'Brien 2018), the live works discussed here are not to be grounded upon any pre-existing taboos that need to be surpassed (Bataille 2012, 35–36), nor do they seek to adopt any given subjectivities. The starting point for these live works would, instead, be closer to Lyotard's position:

There is no need to begin with transgression, we must go immediately to the very limits of cruelty, perform the dissection of polymorphous perversion, spread out the immense membrane of the libidinal 'body' which is quite different to a frame. (Lyotard 1993, 20)

The performances at stake operate as fields occupied only by intensities where parrhēsiastic games take place to reveal life-as-surface, after shattering all essentialist categories and ideological hierarchies. Within this suggested condition of successive entanglements where bodies intra-act with other bodies, the possibility of a new ethics of care emerges. The following question, then, arises: are there any ethical limits within performance-as-surface and, consequently, life-as-surface? What would be the thickness and the porosity of those limits? After dismissing all kinds of morality, what is suggested instead would be *the investigation of modes of conduct based on ideas of care*; with care understood here as *the maintenance of one's ability to be useful*. Given that one agrees with Agamben's definition of intimacy as "use-of-oneself as relation with an inappropriable" (Agamben 2016, 91), then the performances brought forward would allow for intimate coherences to happen, not on the grounds of possession—and thus exchangeability—but on the uninterrupted circulation of forces via the use of the performer's body, that would then be able to shapeshift across various fluid subjectivities, through use-of-oneself. In the suggested paradigm, therefore, care would not only be an ethical apparatus to safeguard the performer's usefulness, but also a potential social contract for a new ethical life towards *being surface*.

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Links for performances discussed (links working at time of publication)

*Corner Time* (2016)

<https://mai.art/projects/asone>  
[despinazacharopoulou.com/corner-time](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/corner-time)  
▶ [vimeo.com/197389133](https://vimeo.com/197389133)

*Introduction* (2015)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/introduction-hzztl](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/introduction-hzztl)  
▶ [vimeo.com/147328308](https://vimeo.com/147328308)

*Being a threat* (2016)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/being-a-threat](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/being-a-threat)  
▶ [vimeo.com/195880210](https://vimeo.com/195880210)

*Aftercare I* (2016)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/blank-1](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/blank-1)

*Love \*me\** (2017)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/love-me](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/love-me)

*D'après S.K.* (2017)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/d-apres-s-k](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/d-apres-s-k)  
▶ [vimeo.com/221403826](https://vimeo.com/221403826)

*Aftercare II* (2016)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/blank-1](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/blank-1)

*Surface* (2017)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/surface-live-to-camera-ii](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/surface-live-to-camera-ii)  
▶ <https://vimeo.com/249317661>

*Pudeur (d'après F.N.)* (2017)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/pudeur-d-apres-f-n](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/pudeur-d-apres-f-n)  
▶ [vimeo.com/265869390](https://vimeo.com/265869390)

*Pudeur II (d'après F.N.)* (2018)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/pudeur-ii-d-apres-f-n](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/pudeur-ii-d-apres-f-n)

*Aphorism* (2019)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/aphorism](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/aphorism)

*Response-ability (d'après K.B.)* (2017)

[despinazacharopoulou.com/response-ability-d-apres-k-b](https://despinazacharopoulou.com/response-ability-d-apres-k-b)  
▶ [vimeo.com/249951756](https://vimeo.com/249951756)

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## Biography

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Her practice investigates performance art as *surface*, and philosophy as embodied practice and method towards a *life which is radically other*. Her work has been presented at events of global impact, e.g.: AS ONE by the NEON Organization & the Marina Abramović Institute (Athens, 2016); London Frieze (2016, 2017); A Possible Island? By the Marina Abramović Institute & the 1st Bangkok Art Biennale (Bangkok, 2018-19), etc. Press/Publications include articles in: *New York Times*, *The Nation Thailand*, *Liberal Newspaper Greece*, *The Art Newspaper Greece*, etc. Dr Zacharopoulou is a Niarchos Foundation ARTWORKS Fellow (2021) and holds the position of the Course Leader of the Contemporary Art Summer School at the Royal College of Art in London. [www.despinazacharopoulou.com](http://www.despinazacharopoulou.com)

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## LEARNING KHAYAL: NOTES ON BEING-WITH

KARIN SHANKAR PRATT INSTITUTE

In classical Indian music the question of consciousness and the nature of becoming *in and with* vocal performance is an enduring one, springing from ancient philosophical thought (Clarke and Kini 2011, 136). I trained in classical Indian vocal music genres, among them, khayal, for several years as a child, a teenager, and on and off into my early twenties. A long stint in humanities departments in the Western academy followed (with very little opportunity for vocal practice); and here I am now, navigating this institution's persistent severance of knowledge from bodily experience. Early in 2020, in the midst of a different writing project, I was searching Deleuze, Marx, and others, struggling to find the words to express "relation" and "becoming" in art. I had long buried the embodied knowing that singing khayal itself might be a subtle teacher in this pursuit; that is, until the pandemic hit. Confined to my Brooklyn apartment, I yearned for an expansive daily practice and decided to return to khayal lessons, this time online. I was fortunate enough to find the wonderful Pune-based guru Priyadarshini Kulkarni to take me on as a student. And so, every Friday morning I sang khayal on Zoom, with the iTablaPro App providing a steady drone, my consciousness "colored" intricately by this form of raga music.<sup>1</sup> In khayal, I also began to experience with new ears, philosophy and music resonating and mutually transforming one another. Here, "audible sound [became] a means of knowledge because of its ability to reveal the inaudible" (Rowell 1992, 38, as quoted in Clarke and Kini 2011, 146).

What follows is,

an autoethnographic fragment,<sup>2</sup>

a vocalist's journal,

(a record of) an instance of pedagogical transmission,

a contemplative riff on singing khayal, reading philosophy, and writing "becoming" and "relation."

\*\*\*

The khayal genre of North Indian classical vocal music assumed its contemporary form in the 1700s. Its name derives from an Arabic-Persian word meaning “imagination” (Wade 1973, 446). Drawing from both Indic and Persian forms, the khayal is modal and monophonic. The “musical materials” that make up khayal include: raga, or a framework of melodic rules; tala, or meter; and chiz, the composition (Wade 1997, 11). What differentiates khayal from the related dhrupad form is the infinite possibility for improvisation that it allows for within the boundaries of any given raga; and so its name, “imagination.” While dhrupad, considered the most classical of vocal genres of North Indian music, has been discursively coded as “masculine,” khayal is fluid and mobile, and can take on both masculine and feminine aspects, depending on context (Alaghband-Zadeh 2015, 350).

A khayal repertoire consists of short songs in Hindi or Urdu on the themes of romantic or divine love, separation, the change of seasons, or the liminal states of dawn and dusk (Bagchee 1998). The singer is usually accompanied by the drone of a tanpura, a harmonium, tabla, and a sarangi. The pleasure of both singing and listening to khayal lies in following this form’s exploration of the limits of possibility of the raga. A skilled singer improvises alongside, teases, or adopts an errant posture with respect to the raga’s melodic rules.

Notes from my improvisation journal:

When you learn khayal from a guru, you neither understand nor forget, you travel.

This form of singing was never traditionally written and while it has been notated over the past century, it is impossible to contain the expansiveness of khayal in writing.

Because of the weight on improvisation, no two renditions of the “same” khayal song will be identical.

When I sing khayal, it is not only a retrieval of the past, a memory of my lessons, but more; it is imagination, and the present.

Can a khayal be tethered to its origin? No. It tampers with authority.

According to scholar Bonnie Wade, while lore has long held that the form was created by the poet Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) in the Delhi Sultanate, some musicologists offer evidence that khayal truly flourished in the following century with the last Sultans of Jaunpur; still others trace its provenance and evolution to Khilji and Tughlaq kings who patronized musical innovation in the Indo-Persian tradition (Wade 1997, 1). While the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries did see an accelerated mixing of Indic, Perso-Arabic, and Turkic-Irani musical systems, most recent scholarship suggests that khayal developed two centuries later, within Delhi’s Sufi sama (“listening”) gatherings, steeped as this milieu was in histories of sonic intermingling, including the influences of devotional Hindu Bhakti songs as well as folk and courtly genres (Brown [Schofield] 2010, 187–8).

This morning, my guru teaches me a bandish in Raga Bhupali. A single-phrase lyric in which a despairing poet asks a traveler to bring her news of her beloved:

Ja ja ja re pathikwa...

This hundreds year-old composition is sung differently each time a khayaliya imagines it into existence, while still bearing the traces of an embodied pedagogical lineage—my teacher, and hers before, and others before that. As I sing this khayal, I understand again a refrain from another dynamic text, “what is it you were doing in the ancient gardens, 300 years ago”? (Khoury 1989, 45).

To warm up my voice, I use long swaras (notes), with each swara residing in a specific position of the scale. And yet, what happens in between and within the swara, the manner in which each is connected to another and elaborated, is more significant (Bor 2002, vii). Singing khayal is a lesson in being-with.

A swara is defined in relation with other notes in the raga. But an Other note is never to be found merely separate from or outside of a particular swara. “Inflections,” “slides,” “ornaments,” “oscillations,” “shakes,” are just some of the names given to these relations between and within swaras (Bor 2002, viii). “For it is always over there, in between, within, that the Other becomes a nameable reality” (Trinh 1996, 7).

As I sing, new ways of finding a swara-in-relation spiritedly unsettle, rather than simply negate, traces of previous vocal leaps.

An especially virtuosic khayaliya sings at the edge of a raga, pushing the raga to the point where the singer and the listener are aware of its limits.

I sing khayal and I am aware of the instance of its production and consumption. My performance is a politics of the now. (But the now does not equal merely the present).

The singer has a relationship of infinity with khayal.

The listener has a relationship of infinity with khayal.

Khayal presents mobile and embodied concepts for being-with, being-nearby, becoming-multiple, becoming-fanciful.

Ja ja ja re pathikwa—go, traveler, bring some news from abroad.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A raga is a tonal framework for composition. Joep Bor (2002) notes the features particular to each raga include fixed scales, order and hierarchy of notes, techniques of intonation and ornamentation, duration, strength, and approach. Most significant is the mood of the raga. As such, Bor concludes, “the association of a particular raga with a specific emotional state, a season or time of day, though intangible, is as relevant as its melodic structure.” Clarke and Kini (2011) describe a raga as a “particular coloration of consciousness” and consequently, a raga is “achieved when that state of consciousness is attained” (140).

<sup>2</sup> For more autoethnographic writing on intersubjectivity in the context of classical Indian music vocal performance see Mani 2017. For more on classical Indian music communities online and affective communities amongst the South Asian diaspora, see Hornabrook 2017.

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## Biography

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## THE COMPOSITE IMPOSSIBLE: FORBIDDEN SYMMETRIES

STEVE TROMANS INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER  
HEIDI SCHMIDT UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY



Listen at [https://youtu.be/\\_S3VT86FXC8](https://youtu.be/_S3VT86FXC8)

This work is a collaboration between Steve Tromans and Heidi Schmidt, and operates in the fold between sound art and philosophy. Both researchers recorded improvised monologues on themes of folding, space and time, and the “tesseract” (a three-dimensional geometric representation of a four-dimensional shape). Tromans remixed these monologues together in a composition that utilises time and pitch stretching, stereo-field panning, and delay and echo-bounce effects to provide for the listener an experience of time and space “impossibility.”

Impossibility is a concept found in Gilles Deleuze’s reformulation of certain aspects of the philosophy of Gottfried von Leibniz. While Leibniz had embraced the notion of an infinite number of possible worlds (“I think there is an infinity of possible ways in which to create the world, according to the different designs which God could form”), the principle of non-contradiction restricted each of those worlds to elements compossible with one another: “the universe is only a certain kind of collection of compossibles; and the actual universe is the collection of all possible existents, that is, of those things that form the richest composite” (as quoted in Look 2013). For Leibniz, compossibles are all individuals that can actually exist together in one world.

The impossible, reformulated via Deleuze, similarly embraces the infinite, though “not only in the totality of possible worlds, but in each chosen world” (Deleuze 2004 [1968], 332). In the infinite foldings and unfoldings it engenders, impossibility implies neither opposition nor contradiction but, rather, “divergence” (59). Unlike Leibniz, Deleuze affirms the existence of divergent series, dissonances of Being that fall outside of Leibniz’s harmonious world. Deleuze describes this multiplicity of distribution, or of divergence considered in affirmative (*i.e.*, not negative or contradictory) terms, as the “play in the creation of the world” (62).

The piece’s composite impossibility is created through the superposition, unfolding, and enfolding of the voices—transforming their original space and time into a “forbidden” zone: the event of the piece’s tesseract. The final composition happens in the listening, rendering the listener a co-composer / compositor.

The text of each monologue is as follows.

### Tromans

Folding. Unfolding. Folding. Enfolding. Folding. The ultimate fold. The tesseract. Folding of time. Folding of space. Time is folded. Space is folded. The folding of time and space. Movement across an ocean. Between two continents. Through time and space. Via the medium of the spoken word. The voice. The voice is a folding of the body. The body and the mind enfolding together. This unfolding of this piece. This movement. From one channel to the other channel. Across to the other side. An act. Folding a tesseract. The ultimate fold. Two voices. Discussing. The same topic. But differently. The difference-in-itself. A Deleuzian fold. A Deleuzian-Leibnizian fold. The movement. The movement through time. The movement through space. I stand here now [and] record this. The universe. The cosmos unfolds. It unfolds in multiverses. Multiple movements. All at the same time. All around me. All the senses alert. I concentrate on my voice and my words. As they move gradually. From one side. To the nether. The nether side. The movement from high to low. From

low to high. From left to right. From right to left. The folding. The fold-ness of it all. The fold. The tesseract. The ultimate movement. From one. To the other. Experience it. Dear listener. Experience it now. Hear that fold. Hear it in operation. It's already folded. Your ears. Your senses are folding it. A further time. Make connections between the two. Between these two voice tracks. Recorded separately. Improvised. The thought of the fold. The thought itself is a fold. The act of listening is a fold. This is the tesseract.

### Schmidt

*Monologue 1:* Space is not empty. What we think of as a vacuum contains the possibility of the creation of elementary particles. Given enough energy. In fact, these potential particles are impatient. Virtually excited. Sparking in space for unimaginably short moments in time. There's this thing called the tesseract. It's a four-dimensional representation of a cube. And it always you to manipulate – no, it exists beyond space and time. To understand the tesseract think of an ant at the hem of your skirt. If the ant wanted to get from one end of your skirt to the other it would have to walk all across the hem. But with the tesseract you can fold the pieces of the skirt. And the poor little ant finds itself all the way over on the other side. Immediately. And I wonder what happens inside that fold. Is all the space and time still going on? Are they all going on at once? Did the ant miss out? I think it may have. Scientists recently discovered a thing called a quasi-crystal. A crystal that's not supposed to exist. I think they're calling it a *trinitrite*. Because they're naming it after the bomb explosion that created it. The nuclear blast that allowed a crystal that has forbidden symmetry. Which I find elegant. It has a symmetry that doesn't repeat. But it's infinite. Sort of the manifestation of the notion of *pi* and everything else that's irrational in our world that is propelled by energy. And time. In our own space right now.

*Monologue 2:* Forbidden symmetries sounds like something Borges would come up with in his labyrinth of twisting paths. Sounds like a composite composition. A synthesis of time. What's inside the fold anyway? I think there are tales that are untold and paths new and old. And that there's a composite compossible that exists and twists through the labyrinth of you and me. And the fold itself. What's inside the fold? You are the composition. You are the synthesis. You are the synthesizer. Key of change. An interweaver. Bridging the gap. You are the tesseract. With forbidden symmetries. Oh-my-god particles everywhere. Cosmic rays and messages that shouldn't exist.

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## Biographies

Steve Tromans is a UK professional musician (pianist and composer) who has been active since the 1990s in the fields of jazz, rock, improvised, Indian, Mongolian, folk, electronic, and experimental musics. He has given over 6,000 performances at festivals and venues (at national and international level) with his own projects and as part of others' ensembles. As a composer, he has written 100+ works. Since the 2010s, he has been involved in artistic research in the intersection between music and philosophy, leading to the award of his PhD (University of Surrey, 2020) investigating a link between the practices of philosophy of time (via an array of concepts from Gilles Deleuze) and his own improvisation and composition for solo piano. In his doctorate, Tromans created a new, multimodal concept, *Rhythmicity*: a way of expressing "the musical-philosophical" in a complex mix of sound and word. His work can be heard online at: <https://soundartphilosophy.bandcamp.com> (*Performance Philosophy* readers may be especially interested in his triple album of piano and spoken word, *ELLIPSES: notes musical & philosophical*, available through his Bandcamp page.)

Heidi Schmidt, Becker Fellow, lives and writes in Roanoke, Virginia. She is pursuing her doctoral degree in Philosophy and Cultural Inquiry at the University of Kentucky.

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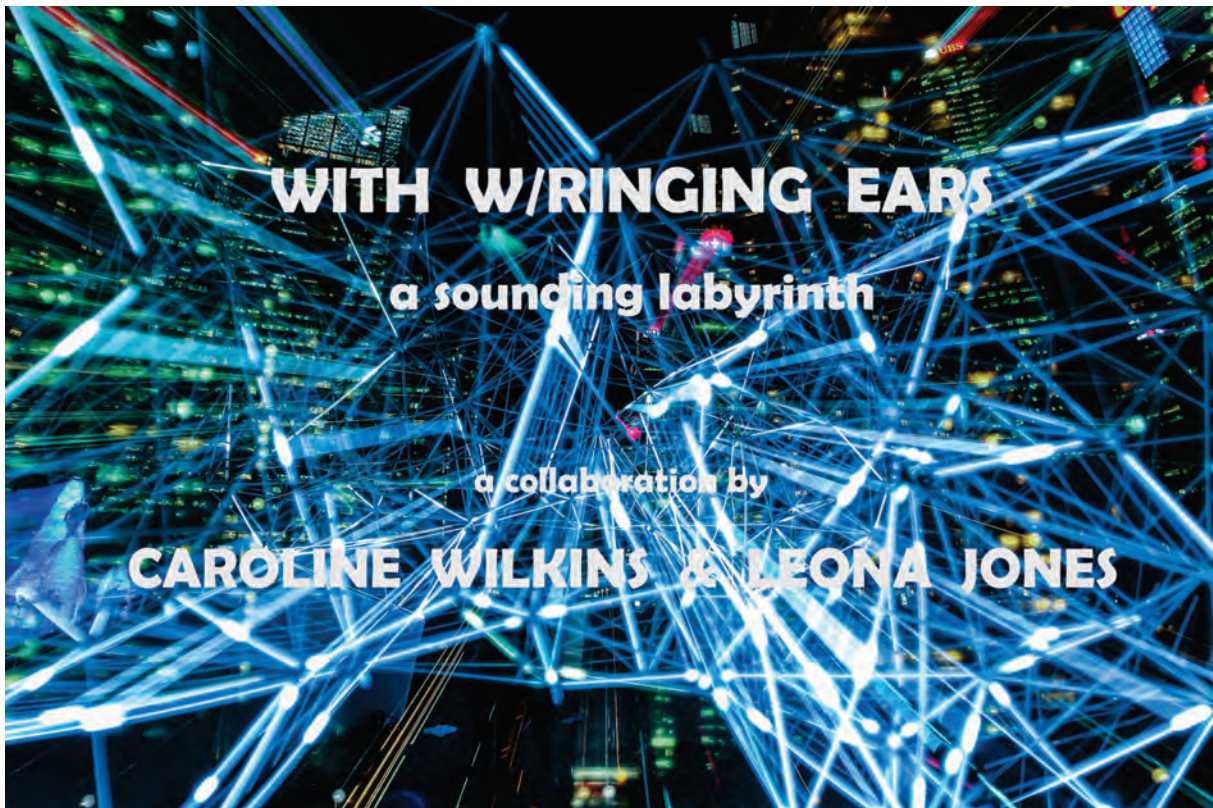


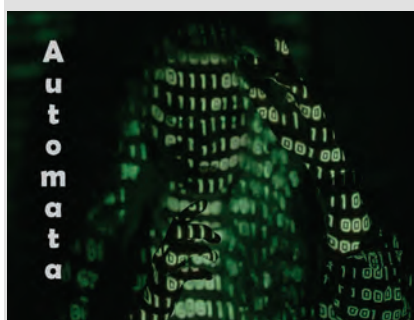
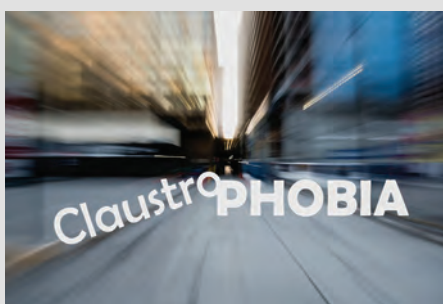
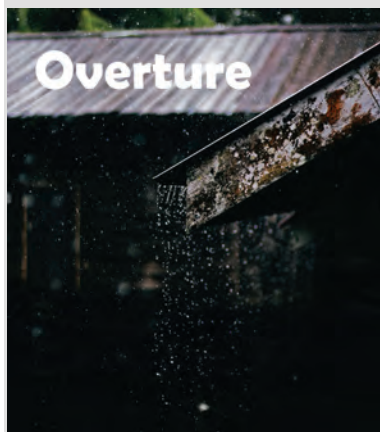
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Listen: <https://performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/350/465>

(for original script see Wilkins [2016])

> **Overture** <

Drip drip drop drop

Eaves drip drip drip drop er eaves drop er eavesdropper eavesdropper eavesdropper  
eavesdropper eavesdropper eavesdropper eavesdropper Eavesdroppers eavesdroppers

> **Claustrophobia** <

remember    contain the memory    fear    hatred    anxiety    excitement    snatch breath    taste  
space    leave trace like sweat-heat chill-touch    cling to skin    shiver-in    drip-in    conspiracy  
troubling - seduction    words    drop-in words    babbling space    soak fibres    vibrate vacuum  
words    words - spike    attack    confound    moments of deadly turbulence

> **Fearfulness** <

screens of protection    words    seep through    reassuring presence    damp breath in /    chilly  
musty    breathe in    dank words on the floor    waiting    scraps of knowledge    moist    under  
the table    hide inside skin    fine    layers    keep mask of pretence

**> *Intrigue* <**

can't hear    speak up    fear discovery    enjoy provoking    split in two at that moment    hear  
echoes of conversations    sound-in confine-in space    nerve-racking double role    no  
spontaneous gesture no spoils of gossip    intrigue-in

**> *Vacuum* <**

mouth - an echo chamber of thoughts    ears - bounce off inner walls of involuntary presence    a  
messenger    a medium    lined up along a double role    one long tunnel    boring through  
cavities    spiralling to a wall

**< *Transmission* > < *Transmutation* >**

voices approach    listen    nearer    spring into speech    transmit    share thoughts    pass on each  
successive perhaps    pass on    caught in the act    anonymous voices    powerless victims  
omnipotent beings    carrying messages - a construction    complex mechanisms of acoustics  
mathematics and optics -    illusions -    natural magic -    alchemy

**< *Automata* >**

creations of imagination    speak and give power    enormous creatures and miniature  
figurines    defy time    in endless circles of cycles of now    present    helpless to intervene restless  
spirits    plagued by apparitions

**< Surveyors >**

eavesdroppers listening to twists and turns lies and intrigues speak catch in time and  
action listen from the vantage point of beyond lend an ear idly anonymously  
claustrophobically all-listening heads one after another one row after another row after  
row capture - with a word

**< Consequential > < Babelbabble >**

let loose a sigh witnesses resound in response a cry a laugh a sharp breath of anticipation  
feelings thoughts eyes ears and voices heavily-laden spaces that separate quietly and  
rapidly captured in webs of consequences disputing truth loudly secret knowledge a double  
role tempers flare a noise a shout a thin mask of doubled material incessant talk noisy  
vast interjections at full volume interspersed a surrounding babble lowered voices  
lowered tones confusion secretive

**< Coda >**

audiences doubling as Eavesdroppers controlling through utterances parts in the chorus  
listen-in attentively thoughts in minds' ears

## Contextualisation

In the fast-changing world of social media, it is imperative to have a text that changes with the times. (Mosco 2019)

*With W/Ringing Ears* emerges from *The Panacousticon*, a performative response in the form of a script by Caroline Wilkins (2016) to an essay by Freddie Rokem (2015) on eavesdropping in classical theatre. Rokem took as his point of departure eavesdropping scenes from plays, coupling them with philosophical discourse. This moment of convergence between philosophy and performance practice prompted Wilkins's response with regard to an act that occupies an acoustic space, one that deliberately includes a figurative phrase within its title. A natural consequence of the script manifested itself during 2020 in the form of vocal recordings, which then led co-authors Wilkins and Jones to explore non-narrative ways of presenting the spoken word as an audio equivalent to digital literature. Thematically, this method of working rebounds on the subject matter itself, eavesdropping being a practice that deals with a chain of hearsay passed from one source to the next and modified each time, something that has now evolved into a highly sophisticated means of (mis-) information.

Digital literature is a relatively new medium, one in which literature is defined in the broadest way possible (Electronic Literature Organization 2021; see also Rowberry 2018, Rinehart 2006). The boundaries of its methodological approach are porous, overlapping with those of established literature, cinema, visual art, poetry, video games to mention but a few. There's no standard form, no current canon, no criteria apart from digital technology being used to both create, present and interact with the work. All this is its strength and its difficulty. Now seems a fine opportunity to embrace the experimental and develop an audio work that follows such principles. Digital literature fragments words, hurls them around cyberspace as a succession of noughts and ones, undermines the expected (and fictional) linearity. We wanted to treat spoken word in the same way and create a fluid audio montage in the head of the listener. Navigation is open and performative; (w)reader becomes collaborator. Choosing a personal path via hyperlinks through the fragment headings offered mirrors the meandering effort needed during practice research enquiries. We're living in exciting/fearful times. Times to question ways of doing and being. Times to find different possibilities, try things out, discover what happens.

Parallel thematic and formal references have also occurred in recent years. In 2008 an ongoing investigation into contemporary forms of eavesdropping was held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Australia (2018). It took the same historical starting point as Wilkins's original representation, namely an acoustic surveillance system invented by Athanasius Kircher in the 1600s, the purpose of which was to 'spy' on conversations and verbal intrigues taking place within the public space of the court. Placed in a contemporary context of audio surveillance by means of digital devices, the concerns of curators Joel Stern and James Parker reflect on the politico-legal problems of such a widely-practiced action that has continued well into our century. Historically speaking it became a minor public order offence in Great Britain during the 1700s.

A further reference for this work emerges in the form of a arts-based practice initiated by Rebecca Collins and Joanna Linsley entitled *Stolen Voices* (Collins and Linsley 2019a, 2019b). The project asks a fundamental question, one that also reflects Wilkins and Jones' starting point: 'What is the relationship between a listener and what is heard?' Whilst Collins and Linsley's *Stolen Voices* explores an expanded eavesdropping practice to investigate a fictional unknown event, our questions form the basis of an abstract soundscape, one that examines the lazy binary of active speaking and passive listening.

Listening is now regarded as an art form in itself, a burgeoning field within and beyond sound art, with practitioners such as Pauline Oliveros, Hildegard Westerkamp, Lawrence Abu Hamdan and the collaborative group *Ultra-red*, and researchers such as Angus Carlyle, Pia Palme and Salome Voegelin exemplifying the diversity within this expanding field. Listening itself is being understood as a holistic act, a back and forth between listeners, rebounding in the wider sociopolitical context. The global reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic involved a rush on-line, substituting so much previously gained from live gatherings and personal experience. The pressure has been on to virtually listen to and watch each other even more than previously, foregrounding surveillance, the corporate, divisions and connections. How can an individual 'wring out' their ears in order to avoid being rendered inert by overload?

In *With W/Ringing Ears* two voices (uttering speech and using extended vocal technique) are heard intermediating between a received world of mechanical sonic reproduction and that of personal utterances based on direct experience. (The work intends framing our twenty-first century Infostorm as worldwide mass overt and covert 'eavesdroppings'—defined as acts that occupy an acoustic space of sorts.) These soundscapes are sculpted from a collaborative text in which language and form take different shapes. Acts of thinking out loud take place, entering into direct confrontation with what is simultaneously being heard and said. This un/manipulated material is mixed to create colour and texture, sense and non-sense. Voices rebound around a labyrinth of sound, creating a complex series of abstract patterns that goes beyond syntactical meaning and enters into a compressed space of vertical time. Shifting back and forth between the tragic-comic aspects of eavesdropping, *With W/Ringing Ears* brings fictive protagonists together as characters that rebound from each others' dramaturgical positions. Caught in this multitude of dialogues that fire back and forth, a potential live audience becomes witness—as an additional eavesdropper—to the various scenarios, creating a version of events that depends both on location and people's own personal experience.

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## Biographies

### Leona Jones

An inter-disciplinary practitioner centred on Word/Sound as event/performance, Leona uses spatiality, audio and field recordings as well as text as she seeks to highlight physicality, location and context, considering them crucial to inter-relationships between maker/word/world. Her commitment to inclusivity, collaboration, research and intuition means she questions definitions, unnoticed boundaries and assumptions. Leona gained a Masters in Performance Writing from Dartington/Falmouth University, and her work has been supported by Arts Council UK as well as individual organisations and galleries. [Soundcloud](#).

### Caroline Wilkins

Independent Composer/Performer/Researcher Dr. Caroline Wilkins completed a practice-based PhD in Sound Theatre at Brunel University in 2012. She has presented at international conferences including ARTECH (Guimares), IFTR Congress (Munich), Sibelius Academy (Helsinki) and Caen University (Normandy). Publications online and in journals include *Perspectives of New Music* (2013), *Studies in Musical Theatre / International Journal of the Performing Arts & Digital Media / Journal of Interdisciplinary Vocal Studies* (2012-18) with Intellect Books, and *Performance Philosophy* 2 (1) (2016). She presented at the Performance Philosophy Biennial Conference 2019, Amsterdam, in conjunction with artist Leona Jones. <http://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/artist/wilkins-caroline>

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE SUN: INTERROGATIONS OF PERFORMANCE OF FLICKER

SONJA BLUM INDEPENDENT ARTIST



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## I. PROLOGUE

We become attuned to the sun as a source of life: flickering light turns into questions and answers, nudged in stillness, to feel and see, anew, formed and unformed things, sensations, images, notions of the universal laws and our place among the stars. Retracing the steps taken before by many throughout history, of opening up dream-like states triggered by flickering light of the sun, to become one with the sun, with the universe, with it all, for a moment, to see without blinders on, to allow a flushing and washing rhythmically of the layers of crust and stiffness in body and thought. From trains, boats, street corners, at the tops of buildings, through trees in full bloom, lush with fluttering leaves, a motion of one's own hand. In this work, I deploy performance as a mode of thinking and philosophy a mode of experiencing. I journey through text, images and a short film, performing philosophical and scientific ideas of flicker.

Performance is a frontier at which a particular kind of experimentation is possible, interrogating reality and the representation of it. Performance is staged and its staging repeated in iterations which can never be exactly the same, and, as such, performance foregrounds questions surrounding the relation between static images, static bits of information, and three-dimensionality. In a historical moment of increasingly abstract mediation of reality through infinite numbers of digital data points analyzed by algorithms and machines inaccessible to any individual and divorced from lived experience, performance is a form of possibility for staging investigations of alternate modes of interrogating reality through what Harney and Moten (2021) frame as individuation and sovereignty. In contrast to interrogation of reality mediated by reductionist methodologies and analysis of 'big data' (Marx 2013), performance is experienced in three-dimensional space: an embodied, eye-witness experience of performers and audience, participating in an unmediated interrogation of reality personally; an enactment of escape and transgression outside of framework of dominant knowledge production mechanisms.

Returning to the sun, we take flicker as inspiration for asking: if the metaphor of performance can be applied to flicker (the sun is 'dancing'), can we make ideas dance? Here, we let ideas of flicker unfold through an embodied performative experience: 1. the methodology of staging is applied to the realm of philosophical and scientific ideas—the foundations of hegemonic systems at large; 2. performance becomes a frontier in which questions surrounding hierarchy of epistemological frameworks can be posed. At stake is shedding of a certain complacency of standard methodologies of arriving at knowledge.



## II. HISTORIES OF FLICKER – INDUCED HALLUCINATIONS

Flickering light can induce hallucinations in almost anyone. Theories on how this occurs are centered on interaction between the externally imposed flicker oscillatory pattern and the internally generated brain oscillatory patterns. It has long been postulated that the basis of consciousness is related to oscillatory patterns of the brain: from Yves Delage in 1919, to Crick and Koch in 1990, to Wolf Singer, Georgy Buzsáki and others in the last two decades (Uhlhaas et al. 2009; Buzsáki and Tingley 2018; Valencia and Froese 2020).

Flicker is a coordinated beat and frequency of 8 to 12 Hz or higher which can be superimposed on brain's alpha rhythm when a subject sits in front of a light source with their eyes closed.<sup>1</sup> Rhythms of the brain are variable, changeable depending on whether the subject is in a resting state or attempting action, eyes open or closed, encountering stimulus or not. At baseline, it appears that different cortical regions of the brain settle at different frequencies, with alpha-band oscillations (8–12 Hz) in the occipital cortex (where visual processing occurs), beta-band oscillations (13–20 Hz) in the parietal cortex, and fast beta/gamma-band oscillations (21–50 Hz) in the frontal cortex.

Uniform luminance flicker stimulation is thought to resonate with the natural frequency of cortical cells, and to evoke waves of cortical activity in the visual cortex, which induces the conscious experience of the hallucinations (Billock and Tsou 2012). Hallucinations strength peaks around flicker frequency of 11 Hz but some lines of evidence suggest that the best frequency for inducing hallucinations is a multiple of intrinsic oscillatory rhythms in the cortex (Pearson et al. 2016).

In the year 1556, Nostradamus sat on Catherine de Medici's rooftop watching the sun with his eyes closed, interrupting the light with his hand spread. It is said this way, he induced visual hallucinations opening up a state of being in which his prophecies arrived (ter Meulen, Tavy, and Jacobs 2009). This story may be the earliest historical mention of flicker induced hallucinations. Subsequently, for over two hundred and fifty years, there has been little mention of the phenomenon of flicker induced hallucinations. The rise of the Enlightenment and skepticism, and the diversification of disciplines, firmed up methodologies of induction and deduction, and amplified the concept of a world of calculable regularity.

Mentions of flicker induced hallucinations appeared again around the year 1819 in the writings of the burgeoning field of neurology, first by Jan Purkinje, who reported swirling geometric visual patterns brought on by diffuse flickering light when waving his hand between his eyes and a gaslight, and the physicist David Brewster who, while experimenting with light polarization inventing the kaleidoscope and stereoscope ("David Brewster" 2022), experienced them when running alongside evenly spaced railways (ter Meulen, Tavy, and Jacobs 2009). This was again forgotten until around 1934 when Adrian and Matthews experimented with automobile headlights shining through a rotating wheel with spokes, and Smythies (1959) described dark, light, and after-image phases of flicker induced hallucinations.

The obscure history of flicker was mentioned in a text titled *The Living Brain*, in which W. Grey Walter described flicker induced hallucinations and their historical mentions, integrating them together

with the newly emerging investigations of brain electrophysiology through use of electroencephalograms and other forms of recordings (Walter 1953). William Burroughs, who had a wide curiosity to uncover ancient, obscure and occult texts, stumbled upon the book on one of his walks in Paris, and read about the hidden powers of flicker. He shared these with his friend Brion Gysin, both at the time living cheap hotel in a narrow alley in the Latin Quarter, later referred to as the Beat Hotel. They met in 1954 in Tangier, and from then on collaborated on art and magic. They held an interest in the occult, and in challenging firmly established dogmas of the Enlightenment. A 1958 diary entry of Gysin's reports he had been traveling on a bus in southern France passing by a row of trees, with sun flickering through, as he started to hallucinate:

An overwhelming flood of intensely bright patterns in supernatural colors exploded behind my eyelids; a multi-dimensional kaleidoscope whirling out through space. The vision stopped abruptly when we left the trees. (Gysin and Wilson 2012, 141)

He confided in Ian Somerville, who had been a mathematician, and asked him to make a stroboscope to mimic the effect of the flickering light through the trees. Somerville created a cylinder with holes and placed it on a 78 RPM turntable with a light bulb within, and when the turntable started spinning the light would come out with a regular frequency within the 8 to 12 Hz alpha range mimicking flicker. Burroughs and Gysin shared an excitement that this was a way to harness the visionary potential of light. The poet Alan Ginsberg wrote about this device as the dream machine. Gysin foresaw a great future for his device eventually replacing the television set in every home. It is reported that he made connections, for example, with the Phillips Corporation who sent a representative to the Beat hotel, but this went nowhere (Sheehan 1997). The company saw no commercial potential and feared the seizure inducing potential of flickering light. The dream machine never came into mass production despite Gysin's best attempts.

In the 1960s, Paul Sharits (Burchfield Penney Art Center) started to create non-narrative, non-objective works he called 'flicker films,' exploring elements of film. Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) also follows similar threads much earlier in the 1920s. Hollis Frampton (1971) is credited with defining the structural cinema movement, sacrificing elements of film to investigate formal issues at the expense of traditional narrative content. Bruce McClure's projector performances in the 1990s used 'Roto-Optic' devices with discs painted with colored patterns mounted on square floor fans rotating at 1200rpm, and viewed under stroboscopic light (Halter 2010).

Across these encounters, the term flicker is related to the Sun, structuralist theory and non-objective, eureka moments, visions of the future, reason, dogma, anti-dogma, hallucinations, rhythms, or the brain. The fields of information and data points is non-linear, non-hierarchical, and is not neat as an idea. It flickers a code, it is information in itself, a dance, a performance, as a counter to the exclusionary dominance of reductionist logic of the Enlightenment on the one hand and reaching for an expanded field of possibility of knowledge building frameworks.



### III. FIELD OF IDEAS AS FLICKER

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, known as the originator of logic, held the belief that it is not possible to say anything true about the world, which by its nature is in constant flux (you can never step into the same river twice). A work-around for this problem was to maintain a consistency among beliefs written as sentences, a system of thinking and writing we now refer to as logic. Sentences can be true, even if the world itself cannot be true, and consistency can be maintained in how beliefs about the world are stated (Hodges 2001). At the same time, a belief has dominated that the senses, the embodied experience, are illogical, invalid somehow, in line with a notion that senses bring us back to flux, time, and change, to the realm where 'truth' does not exist.

Can we invent a way of working through ideas embracing the flux, immersed in it, rather than extracting points of data/ statements/ sentences, reductions of the whole? Can a search for 'truth' be performed within flux, dipped back into the realm of the senses and embodied experience? Can a philosophy built of this yield a foundation of hegemonic systems of a completely different kind, of a kind that perhaps does away with hegemony as obsolete, when all is in flow, in flux? Hegemonic systems which we know now, perhaps figments of imaginations of sets of postulates gone awry in minds separated from body, separated from the flow, severed heads of Cartesian intellectual inheritance.

What happens if ideas are presented in a way that mimics flashes of flicker? So, in a sense this is where the ideas perform, by taking the form of flicker. The formal framing within postulates, borrowing form of logic, becomes the staging of a performance of ideas. Flashes of ideas, tied together through the formal veil of postulates, foregrounds questions of legitimacy of a form of play with ideas in which one postulate may not neatly lead to the other, and, together, they do not by design fulfill the job of neatly packaging a message. Rather, a flickering field of ideas is presented, and each read may offer another line of flight, another conclusion, opening up a horizon of ideas rather than narrowing to a point.

in relation to knowledge/  
the in-between/  
the relation of the body to the sun/  
experimenters facing the world/  
starting from scratch/  
letting go into the vastness of possibility/

finding resonance/

/ flickering between extraction and wholeness/  
/ flickering between isolation and belonging/  
/ flickering between pinning an idea down and the whole world/

looking for magic /  
learning and relearning to play/

Postulate 1: Play (Winnicott 2005) is a mode of keeping things alive in the field of philosophical and scientific ideas. An attempt to consider a role reversal of philosophical and scientific ideas is intentional play, using the idea of flicker, for performing a flickering between determinism, contextualization, experience, and perception of the encounter with ideas.

Postulate 2: A performance can, through a field of data points, reveal answers, thoughts, new information for consideration, to be encountered in a non-linear/ not prearranged way, a veil is thrown over a set of ideas/ movements/ perceivable content which can flash/ flicker thoughts.

Postulate 3: Ephemera is evidence (Muñoz 1996), not intended to negate knowledge arrived at through scientific discovery. Rather, as a complementary process, anti-rigor and anti-evidence function to reformulate materiality in an anti-normative, counter-hegemonic way, a form of decolonisation of thought.

Postulate 4: Anticipatory learning is embedded in performance, as a labor of imagining the world differently, via the undercommons (Harten and Moten 2013) of philosophy. A form of flickering ideas, not arranged in a sequence that follows strict temporal and spatial order, decenters hegemonic Enlightenment and structuralism paradigms of arriving at and coding knowledge.

Postulate 5: Philosophies expand in potential for illumination when viewed outside of strict lineages of thought. In considerations of flicker and relationship of internal and external worlds in knowledge, the Ayurvedic notion of Pratyksa (perception)—the basis and ground for all forms of knowledge—is relevant, as is intromission theory of vision put forth in Ibn al-Hayathm's *Book of Optics*.

Postulate 6: Coding knowledge can happen outside of words and numbers. We need expanding notions of how we mark what is known. For example, taking inspiration from Wu Tsang and Fred Moten's *Gravitational Feel* (2019), using numerous strands of fabric rope, which draw inspiration from "quipu" or talking knots—a sophisticated form of Incan data and record collection using knotted string, which may have been used to map pilgrimage routes or act as memory tools in retelling oral histories.

Postulate 7: Centering anti-normative, feminist, counter-hegemonic knowledge making systems, ways of moving, of being alone and together, of making new work, of seeing, is breaking the dominant beams of light of culture and science into a spectrum, sub-particles of possibility, to build new ways of thinking and being.

#### IV. PERFORMANCE

To synthesize possibility  
A solution  
To the problem  
of encounter of bodies  
Living and inanimate  
A dream of something new  
arising from the combination  
of the moving body  
within the moving world.

Watch: <https://vimeo.com/663744030/fed5f5700f>

My own fascination with flicker began on a repeated daily train commute from Atlantic Terminal Brooklyn to Long Island, which I took in early mornings eastward and back to Brooklyn in the afternoons. Blinded by the sun flashing and pulsating from behind cloud formations, warehouses, brownstones, graffiti, and people whizzing past, presenting themselves in snippets of instant visual flash, induced rich textures of imagination. This space filled with imagination became a cherished experience to inhabit on a daily basis. I started to snap photos, repeated photos flashing over the flashing sun, over and over again, capturing the snippets we were passing, sometimes in blurrrrr. It did something, it made it possible to write more truly, more presently, to have bold new ideas present themselves.

It reminded me of travel I had done in the past, by plane, by train, the special similar feeling of inspiration that would possess me with encounter of the open road. I thought, what is special about moving? I think back to the idea of the origins of the nervous system, and suggestions that the origins of the nervous system are purely related to evolution of movement, so that all that ever came after that in evolution of how we know, think and consider, is built on a foundation concerned with and responsive at its core to movement.

Perhaps the very core of the possibility of what the nervous system can process and how it is intimately tied to movement and resonance; passing images, flickering images may have something to do with heightening and replicating the very core of the nature of the nervous system. Is flicker part of the essence of the encounter of the moving body with moving world? A movement machine, whose motor actions are in relation to the world it is moving past. So perhaps it is in movement that the optimal possibility of the nervous system becomes most palpable and apparent. If so, then what is this optimal possibility of the nervous system? To synthesize possibility, a solution to the problem of encounter of bodies, living and inanimate, a dream of something new arising from the combination of the moving body within the moving world.

The sun, as the source of light and life, inspires us to look again, to look more deeply, and to not be afraid to stare right at the bright light which folds around to suture the incisions and ruptures of extracted body and earth, snapshots of movements and ideas frozen in time, extracted from flux, to return to continuous movement, a breathing, a return to life, to dream the world anew.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brain activity is characterized by distinct intrinsic rhythms in variable frequencies most commonly alpha, beta, theta and gamma. Theta/ gamma coupling for example is often discussed in relation to hippocampus functioning in learning and memory, whereas alpha rhythms are associated with general arousal/ wakeful state, and so on. External stimuli can find resonance with internal brain rhythms, and this is what happens with flicker of certain frequencies. For further reading see ter Meulen, Tavy, and Jacobs 2009; Hasselmo and Stern 2014; Mauro, Raffone, and VanRullen 2015; Buzsáki and Tingley 2018.

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## Biography

Sonja Blum works across multiple media through a veil of intuition, memory, and scientific method, using play, to consider how modes of knowledge production and world building are legitimized.

Recent and current exhibitions include: *I Dialogue, Kinch*, Belmacz Gallery, London (2021), *Anti-Fear / Protiv Straha*, Footnote Centre Belgrade Serbia Youth Biennial 2021, *Incision // falling together, holding apart*, Center for Performance Research, New York (2019), *And Apollo*, Take Care Gallery, Los Angeles (2019); *Fear of Revolution II*, Dixon Place, New York (2018); *Fear of Revolution*, Dixon Place, New York (2017); *Digital memory prosthetics*, REVERSE Gallery (2016), *To the left of the pantry and under the sugar shack*, La Mama, New York (2016).

Sonja holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2019). She lives and works in New York City.

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## WHITENESS

**BEN SPATZ** UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD  
WITH  
**NAZLIHAN EDA ERÇİN** LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
**ILONA KRAWCZYK** UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD  
**AGNIESZKA MENDEL** INDEPENDENT ARTIST



Whiteness (Alford; Alcoff; Saldana; Walker; Yancy)  
is a tyranny of writing. (Derrida; Rasmussen)

Dividing human from animal, (Agamben 12; Jackson)  
whiteness equates knowing with writing. (Agamben 16; Sánchez)

Only writing allows the philosopher (Heidegger in Agamben)  
to call a tree or a bird “poor in world.” (Agamben 51)

Only whiteness allows the philosopher (Agamben 57)  
to conceive of the human as “open” (62)  
and the animal as closed. (59)

 <https://vimeo.com/performancephilosophy/whiteness>

## Transcript

**Whiteness** (Ahmed; Alcoff; Saldanha; Wekker; Yancy)  
**is a tyranny of writing.** (Derrida; Brander Rasmussen)

**Dividing human from animal,** (Agamben 12; Jackson)  
**whiteness equates knowing with writing.** (Agamben 16; Sánchez)

**Only writing allows the philosopher** (Heidegger in Agamben)  
**to call a tree or a bird “poor in world.”** (Agamben 51)

**Only whiteness allows the philosopher** (Agamben 57)  
**to conceive of the human as “open”** (62)  
**and the animal as closed.** (59)

-

**Heidegger describes the experience of disembodiment,**  
**which he calls “boredom.” In this state,** (Agamben 63)  
**the world is present but has “nothing to offer.”** (64)

**Affect is zero, affordances are null.** (Agamben 66-68)  
***A body can do nothing.*** (70)

**This is the beginning of whiteness,** (Baucom; Hage; Weheliye)  
**the “anthropological machine of humanism,”** (Agamben 29)  
**or *anthropogenesis*: a structure, not an event** (79; Wolfe)

**From here, it becomes possible to destroy the world.** (Liboiron)

-

**Words are not things that can be written down.** (Simpson)  
**Freedom is not a kind of speech.** (Kelley; McKittrick)

**How do we *call in* philosophy?** (la paperson; Manning)  
**How do we *call in* the act of writing?** (Robinson 77-105)

**Only by abandoning the *logos*,** (Agamben 90)  
**the illusion of transparency:** (Silva)  
**not writing, but the tyranny of writing.** (King)

**Can the white body be decolonized** (Agamben 10, 91-92)  
**without killing it?** (Bey 69-70; Rigby Jr. and Ziyad; Spatz 18)

-

“The Bible, the Greeks: What is the nature of these texts’ openness to the whole world? One the one hand, for Levinas, they are available to the whole world; on the other hand, they *are* the whole world. The whole world is in these texts and the refusal of these texts, the failure to enter into them is also a failure to enter into the world...

“At issue is the possibility and desirability of avoiding song which is associated with intoxication, sleep, lack of seriousness, the technoprimitivity that attends modern audiovisual distraction...”

— Moten (11, 25)

## Credits

“whiteness” (2022).

Video essay by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Ilona Krawczyk, and Agnieszka Mendel. *Performance Philosophy* 7 (2): Margins.

Practitioners: Ilona Krawczyk and Ben Spatz  
Director / Witness: Nazlıhan Eda  
Videographer: Agnieszka Mendel  
Editor / Annotator: Ben Spatz

This session took place on 31 July 2017, during the project “Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork” at the University of Huddersfield, UK (AHRC 2016–2018).

During the session, Ilona Krawczyk shared work from her PhD research on embodied voice (University of Huddersfield).

The book is *The Open: Man and Animal* by Giorgio Agamben (2004).

Special thanks to Caroline Gatt for introducing books into the lab.

On the research method, see:

Spatz, Ben. 2020. *Making a Laboratory: Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video*. New York: Punctum Books.

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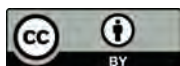
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## SOBRE CONEXÕES QUE TRANSCENDEM O CONTROLE [ON CONNECTIONS THAT TRANSCEND CONTROL]

ANA LIRA INDEPENDENT ARTIST

Eu sabia que ele não encontraria o que queria;  
e sabia, também, que aquela era a última vez,  
a última vez, que a minha capacidade de articulação  
e conhecimento seriam usados  
para olhar a minha região pela perspectiva das ausências.

Passei a dedicar meu trabalho como artista, fotógrafa, curadora, narradora, editora, articuladora e outros desdobramentos para evidenciar os processos de expansão e criação dos povos e lugares que compõem meus circuitos de vida; e faço isso por entender que sempre ocupamos outros lugares tangíveis e não visíveis que transcendem o estereótipo de “povos marginalizados, tutelados e incapazes,” resultantes dos sistemas de invasão, transferência e genocídio praticados pela atividade colonial e suas filiações contemporâneas.

Quando fui convidada para elaborar o prefácio desta publicação—*South Boom Boom*—esta era a minha principal motivação: estar em diálogo com outros criadores em estado de expansão de seus ciclos. As experiências dos textos, contudo, me mostraram que as violências visíveis e simbólicas, que ganham novos contornos a cada ciclo, continuam (de)marcando as vidas criativas mesmo em territórios que se dizem em revisão de seus “passados, estruturas e metodologias colonais.”

O *Boom Boom* que deveria remeter a uma explosão de sensorialidades em pleno processo de revigoração e celebração, pelas integridades de suas criações, ganha outros gestos. Eles materializam-se no direito-desejo de evidenciar como as ainda presentes experiências de violência podem ser revertidas em estados de recusa desta contínua renovação das exclusões colonais.

Eu entendo que pode parecer incomum usar os termos recusa e exclusão em lugares distintos, mas se a recusa ocorre como gesto de resposta a uma política de exclusão, ela oferece manifestações diferentes da recusa que ocorre como resultado da política de exclusão em si. A recusa como gesto é uma resposta assertiva de artistas, criações e vivências a uma política que começa pelo uso termo “Sul Global” associado a expressões complicadas como “história dos vencidos” e “regiões em desenvolvimento,” em vez da conexão com existências que sempre colaboraram para a manutenção vital do planeta em todas as suas dimensões.

A recusa também atua na mesma vibração quando vem como resposta a um caminho de mediação do próprio termo “Sul” como substituto contemporâneo de “Índio” ou de “O outro,” que foram palavras utilizadas para nomear qualquer povo com manifestações diferentes do que era aceito por diversos modelos do projeto colonial.

Se há de se responder pelo termo “Sul,” que seja pela integridade de sua presença e pela possibilidade de admitir que dele também podemos ver que existem lestes, noroestes, oeste, nordestes, sudoestes, sudestes e diversos pontos intermediários, diagonais e opostos de vibração, que alteram a percepção e as sensibilidades criativas do globo quando se manifestam, inclusive pontos dentro do “Norte Global” que o próprio norte não vê.

Por isso, recusar uma política de exclusão com uma resposta que afirma *a presença de corpos que sentem*—em suas liberdades de expressar raiva, frustração, distância, força, devaneios, segredos ou desejo de desmonte—é um caminho interessante para compor laços possíveis entre artistas, curadores, coreografes, diretores, escritores e outros manifestantes de lugares tão diferentes, mas que foram convidadas para responder ao chamado da publicação. Deste modo, ainda que saibamos que nem todo o grupo de criadores do programa está neste recorte assertivo e que nem todos que receberam o convite puderam colaborar, há boas *sementes* aqui.

Acho importante pontuar a questão do recorte porque moro no Brasil, um país cuja imensa territorialidade foi consolidada pelo projeto colonial colocando dentro de uma camisa de força povos, culturas, dinâmicas e manifestações que não tinham unidade entre si—e continuam não tendo. Prefiro trabalhar com a recusa desta unidade justamente para que você que está entrando neste diálogo compreenda que a presença de diversos brasileiros nesta publicação não significa um bloco homogêneo e muito menos a concentração de saberes de um mesmo ponto do “Sul Global.”

As diversas regiões do Brasil nem falam a mesma língua—ainda que haja o português brasileiro—e muito menos expressam-se de forma semelhante. Por vivermos diante de muitas possibilidades sempre, entendemos a necessidade de que, às vezes, recortes são necessários. Se precisarmos, por exemplo, fazer uma publicação com povos negrodescendentes da costa leste do Brasil—onde eu resido—trabalharemos com gestos de norte a sul da costa, uma distinção imensa de expressões resultantes dos encontros/dissonâncias entre povos originários e povos vindos das diásporas e migrações (voluntárias e forçadas) que chegaram ao país.

É amplo e inda assim é um recorte do cenário de povos que oferecem muitas perguntas e muitas respostas distintas para processos de existência, mantendo fluxos de articulação de suas nuances como proposições paralelas às contínuas políticas de enquadramento e unificação. O exemplo do Brasil é importante, inclusive, para compreendermos a amplitude de expressões, nesta mesma publicação, uma vez que ela traz textos de colaboradores de países que estão em outras partes geográficas do globo, a exemplo do Irã.

É também importante comunicar que, ao escrever esta apresentação, eu tive acesso a conteúdos em línguas várias e, mesmo entre criadores que falavam inglês ou português brasileiro, eram internamente expressões que não estavam neutralizadas por sistemas de controle gramatical e vocabular. A experiência me ofereceu um bom horizonte de interação, inclusive com textos que eu não tenho ideia do que está escrito, porque acessei seus conteúdos por meio de línguas que não falo e as experimentei a partir de outras naturezas de relação.

Observei nuances ou o que eu imagino como palavras entrelaçarem-se compondo movimentos que fazem meus olhos produzirem movimentos pela tela. Eu preferi interagir com elas dessa maneira, em vez de colocar os conteúdos nos tradutores online para descobrir o que significam. O meu mais recente trabalho como artista-curadora-articuladora é sobre não forçar processos de tradução, de modo que esta relação com os segredos das línguas alheias me estimulam de outros modos.

Eu não sinto necessidade de saber tudo porque somos povos que oferecemos muitas perguntas e muitas respostas distintas para processos de existência; e quanto mais elaborarmos estes cotidianos em diálogo com os sentires que queremos expressar, mais temos chances de manter fluxos de articulação de sistemas complexos, que é o que efetivamente importa neste cenário.

Digo isso porque venho de um contexto familiar e comunitário que evita hierarquizar saberes culturais, ainda que entenda a importância dos procedimentos de cada manifestação destes saberes. Este é um traço de vários outros povos negrodescendentes e indígenas do Brasil que marca muito a noção de criação das coletividades e comunidades—e percebo que com suas especificidades, ele também aparece em dinâmicas de outros povos do planeta, incluindo os que colaboraram para *South Boom Boom*.

A questão é que estas nuances vão sendo apagadas ou desconsideradas quando criadores começam a se relacionar com certos setores da arte e passam a ter que traduzir suas subjetividades para as subjetividades aceitas nos circuitos derivados de sensibilidades, metodologias e categorias criadas pelo projeto colonial, implantadas no sistema moderno e renovadas em certas movimentações da arte contemporânea.

Faço este comentário porque também recebi esta formação em parte da minha vida escolar/acadêmica e passei quase uma década com a minha subjetividade sequestrada, em uma hipnose provocada pela convivência com um certo tipo de abordagem cultural e intelectual que recusava os saberes do corpo e dos povos cujas criações não passavam pelo “*controle dos instintos pelo entendimento.*”

Este foi o momento que eu sinto que trilhei caminhos que não eram meus, em que usei parte da minha energia para defender ou escrever sobre movimentos que silenciavam ainda mais a vivacidade do que somos em nossas integridades. Em meus processos de desneutralização, eu percebi que criar não é uma metodologia de treinamento, separada da vida, como parece ser para povos que fecharam os olhos para os seus criares cotidianos e passaram a entender isso como um ofício extra-casa ou uma especialização.

Em uma comunidade indígena brasileira ninguém se separa da vida para aprender a fazer adereços com graus de complexidade e trançados exímios. Na Guiné-Bissau ou em Baro ninguém busca especialização para aprender a talhar um tronco de árvore e fazer *djembes* com sonoridades de colocar corpos em transe. Migramos para entrar em contato e não porque partimos do princípio que não sabemos. Este sentimento está bastante presente em alguns conteúdos aqui propostos e é muito bom perceber que é possível chegar a reflexões semelhantes por outros caminhos, inclusive situados no campo do não entendimento formal de uma língua.

Esta é uma síntese de *South Boom Boom*. Uma coletânea de sementes das reflexões de propositores oriundos de coletividades criadoras que não aceitam ter suas subjetividades encurraladas por relações de poder que não as respeitam.

*sobre elos que transcendem controles*

—Ana Lira para South Boom Boom

## ON CONNECTIONS THAT TRANSCEND CONTROL

I knew he wouldn't find what he wanted;  
and I knew, as well, that this was the last time,  
the last time that my articulation skills  
and knowledge would be used  
to look at my region from the perspective of absences.

After this encounter, I began to dedicate my work as an artist, photographer, curator, storyteller, editor, and articulator to highlighting the processes of expansion and creation of the peoples and places that make up my life circuits. I do this because I understand that we always occupy other tangible and non-visible places that transcend the stereotype of so-called "marginalised, tutelaged and incapable peoples," resulting from the systems of invasion, transfer and genocide practiced by colonial activity and its contemporary affiliations.

When I was invited to write the preface of this publication—*South Boom Boom*—this was my main motivation: to be in dialogue with other creators in a state of expanding their cycles. The experiences of the texts, however, showed me that visible and symbolic violence, which gains new contours in each cycle, continues to (de)mark creative lives even in territories that claim to be revising their "colonial pasts, structures and methodologies."

The *Boom Boom*—that should refer to an explosion of sensorialities in full process of invigoration and celebration, by the integrality of its creations, open other gestures. They materialise in the *direito-desejo* (right-desire) to highlight how still-present experiences of violence can be reverted into states of refusal of this continuous renewal of colonial exclusions.

I understand that it may seem uncommon to use the terms "refusal and "exclusion" in these different contexts. However, if refusal occurs as a gesture of response to a politics of exclusion, then it offers different manifestations than the refusal that occurs as a result of the politics of exclusion itself. Refusal as a gesture is an assertive response of artists, creations and experiences to a politics that begins with the use of the term "Global South," associated with complicated expressions such as "history of the defeated" and "developing regions," rather than with the connection to existences that have always collaborated for the vital maintenance of the planet in all its dimensions.

Refusal also acts with the same vibration when it comes as a response to a way of mediating the very term "South" as a contemporary substitute for "Indian" or "The Other," which were words used to name any people with manifestations different from what was accepted by various models of the colonial project.

If there is to be an answer to the term "South," let it be for the integrity of its presence and the possibility of admitting that from this term we can also see that there are easts, north-west, west, north-east, south-west, south-east and various points in between: diagonals and opposites of

vibration that alter the perception and creative sensibilities of the globe when they manifest, including points within the "Global North" that the north itself does not see.

Therefore, refusing a policy of exclusion with a response that affirms the presence of bodies that feel—in their freedom to express anger, frustration, distance, strength, reveries, secrets or desire for dismantling—is an interesting way to compose possible links between artists, curators, choreographers, directors, writers and other demonstrators from such different places, but who were invited to respond to the publication's call. In this way, even though we know that not all of the programme's group of creators are in this selection and that not all those who received the invitation were able to collaborate, there are good seeds here.

I think it is important to point out the question of the selection because I live in Brazil, a country whose immense territoriality was consolidated by the colonial project that placed within a straitjacket peoples, cultures, dynamics and manifestations that had no unity among themselves—and still do not. I prefer to work with the refusal of this unity precisely so that you, who are entering this dialogue, understand that the presence of diverse Brazilians in this publication does not mean a homogeneous block, much less a concentration of knowledge from the same point in the "Global South."

The various regions of Brazil do not speak the same language—even though there is a Brazilian Portuguese—and, even less, do they express themselves in a similar way. Because we are constantly confronted with many possibilities, we understand the need to make the necessary selections. If we need, for example, to make a publication with black people descending from the east coast of Brazil—where I live—we will be working with gestures from north to south of the coast: an immense distinction of expressions resulting from the encounters/dissonances between original peoples and peoples coming from diasporas and migrations (voluntary and forced) that arrived in the country.

It is broad and still it is a partial fragment of the scenario of peoples who offer many questions and many different answers to processes of existence, maintaining flows of articulation of their nuances as propositions parallel to the continuous policies of framing and unification.

It is also important to communicate that, while writing this presentation, I had access to contents in several languages that, even among creators who spoke English or Brazilian Portuguese, brought expressions not neutralised by grammatical and vocabular control systems. The experience offered me a good horizon of interaction, even in the texts where I cannot understand what is written, since I accessed them through languages that I do not speak and experienced them through other natures of relation.

I observed nuances or what I imagine as words intertwining, making my eyes move across the screen. I preferred to interact with them in this way, rather than putting the contents into online translators to find out what they mean. My most recent work as an artist-curator-articulator is about not forcing translation processes, so this relationship with the secrets of other people's languages stimulates me in other ways.

I don't feel the need to know everything because we are peoples who offer many questions and many different answers for processes of existence; and the more we elaborate these daily lives in dialogue with the feelings we want to express, the more we have chances of maintaining flows of articulation of complex systems, which is what effectively matters in this scenario.

I say this because I come from a family and community context that avoids hierarchising cultural knowledge, even though I understand the importance of the procedures of each manifestation of this knowledge. This is a trait of several other black-descendent and indigenous peoples in Brazil that greatly marks the notion of creation of collectivities and communities—and I realise that with its own specificities, it also appears in dynamics of other peoples on the planet, including those who collaborated on *South Boom Boom*.

The point is that these nuances are erased or disregarded when creators begin to relate to certain sectors of art and are continually forced to translate their subjectivities into the subjectivities accepted in the circuits derived from sensibilities, methodologies and categories created by the colonial project, implanted in the modern system and renewed in certain movements in contemporary art.

I make this comment because I also received this training for a large part of my academic life and spent almost a decade having my subjectivity kidnapped through a hypnosis provoked by living with a certain type of cultural and intellectual approach that refused the knowledge of the body and of the people whose creations did not pass through the control of instincts through understanding.

This was the moment when I feel I walked paths that were not mine, where I used part of my energy to defend or write about movements that silenced even more the vivacity of what we are in our integrities. In my de-neutralisation processes, I realised that creating is not a training methodology, separate from life, as it seems to be for people who closed their eyes to their daily creations and started to understand it as an extra-daily craft or a specialisation.

In a Brazilian indigenous community, no one separates themselves from life to learn how to make ornaments with high degrees of complexity and exquisite weaves. In Guinea-Bissau or Baro no one seeks specialisation to learn how to carve a tree trunk and make djembes with sounds that put bodies in a trance. We migrate to make contact and not because we assume we don't know. This feeling is quite present in some of the contents proposed here and it is very good to realise that it is possible to reach similar reflections through other paths, even when they are placed outside the fields formally understood as knowledge.

This is a synthesis of *South Boom Boom*. A collection of seeds from the reflections of proposers coming from creative collectivities that do not accept to have their subjectivities cornered by relations of power that do not respect them.

—Ana Lira for *South Boom Boom*

## Biography

Visual artist, photographer, curator, radio host, writer and editor based in Recife (PE - Brazil). She is a specialist in Cultural Journalism with an emphasis on Theory and Critique of Culture. It observes (in)visibility as a form of power and pays attention to dynamics involving everyday sensitivities. His practice is based on collective processes and partnerships, having worked with them for more than two decades. In these initiatives, it is dedicated to strengthening collaborative creation practices that observe the between the lines of power relations that affect our communication process, the articulations of everyday life and the way we produce knowledge in the world. She is a member of the collective EhCho.org, Nacional Trovoa and CARNI - Coletivo de Arte Negra e Indígena.

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## DIARY OF A COLONIAL DIARRHEA: TRYING TO JUSTIFY THE UNJUSTIFIABLE

RODRIGO BATISTA INDEPENDENT ARTIST

I see you making mistakes and it isn't a sin,  
apart from when it makes other people bleed  
I see you dreaming of and it frightens  
Lost in a world that doesn't allow to get in  
You are getting out of my life  
and it seems to take a long time  
If you cannot return, at least send news  
You think I'm crazy  
But everything's gonna be right  
I'M ENJOYING EACH SECOND  
BEFORE IT BECOME A TRAGEDY

"On your shelf"  
Pitty, female Brazilian rock star

This essay is a process of capturing an experience that, although individual, may also speak to the practices of others. It is an essay resulting from a process of artistic reflection condemned by the neoliberal ties of individualism and the boycott of collective and decentralized thoughts. It is a diary of colonial diarrhea, generated by centuries-old bad meals, seasoned with Patriarchy, White Supremacy, and the maintenance of hegemonies that continue to explode entire digestive systems, killing cultures and exposing rotten intestines on hygienic screens for consumption 24/7.

## First Shit: Innocence and Good Intentions

Hell is full of good intentions

Popular saying

I arrived in Europe, in Amsterdam, almost five years ago in 2016. The two years that preceded and motivated my immigration were filled with macro and micro political social destruction. One of them, of a macro-political nature, was the collapse of democracy (or the revelation that the concept of democracy never existed for countries like mine): through a coup d'état led by the Brazilian centre-right, guided by US Institutions and disseminated by the Brazilian bourgeois media, Brazil's first female president is expelled from office (Rousseff 2019). The absurdity of the ease with which democracy is destroyed is overwhelming. Democracy has failed. Representation becomes a flawed concept, an appealing lie.

The second destruction was of a micro-political nature: a strike by art educators in the Artistic-Pedagogical Program "Fábricas de Cultura," in the community of Capão Redondo, on the outskirts of the South Zone of São Paulo, of which I was an active part (Pina 2016). This was a strike, without the support of unions, led by educators and students, which lasted more than three months and had on its agenda the repudiation of racist and misogynistic dismissals in the months before, in addition to demanding the reopening of the public library that was closed by the Institution responsible for the Program. It was a strike built on radical thinking in solidarity with colleagues who had been fired for somber reasons, precisely because there was a certainty that we would all be fired after such a powerful protest. We were all fired when the strike ended, as we had expected. The students, who were occupying the Program building, were imprisoned as criminals for two days. It was the end of the democratic farce.

So my arrival in Europe was fraught with the fundamental political issues that 2016 presented to me: the birth of a new type of macro-authoritarianism and the desire for insurrection and resistance in the micro-sphere. With this feeling and with the help of several references, I built the show "The Furious Rodrigo Batista," a performative work that puts my body at the centre of such frustrations and desires.<sup>1</sup> It is a show about Brazil, with the well-intentioned desire to denounce: as if presenting such a show on European ground would bring some significant change to the situation in Brazil (Batista 2018). This is an illusion fueled by European and North American neoliberal activism in which the artist/curator is placed as a possible saviour of such situations, while at the same time producing intrinsically narcissistic self-promotion of themselves in the spotlight of fame (and personal profit).



*Figure 1: The Furious Rodrigo Batista (Side A) (2018).  
Photo: Alessandro Sala. Courtesy of Centrale Fies, in the frame of Live Works vol6.*

When I performed the show, bleeding from my ass, in front of the European audience, I felt weirdly violated, because the political impotence of my work was triggered by the consumerist and fetishizing pleasure that I managed to capture from the audience: the consumption of “my” misery, which was not mine, since I was denouncing police violence against black Brazilian youth, which I am not a part of. The consumerist pleasure of the misery put on stage also revealed a hypocritical game of pity and non-belonging; that is, in the end, the feeling that remained was that all the gore presented on stage could only concern this country far away from Europe, called Brazil.

From this desperation to turn my practice into something that could have direct implications for European audiences, I turned to the idea of making a “B side” of the work carried out in my first year in Europe. For that, I tried to bring this continent to the centre of the discussion, making a play that could confront the contemporary colonial state to which we all belong (Batista 2019).

At the end of my research trajectory, I organically understood that the two works were really just one: divided into “Side A” (pornography of Brazilian poverty) and “Side B” (confrontation with contemporary colonialism). Presenting the work in different contexts, its relevance is confirmed by a market need that is very present in European theatre festivals: the need to see an immigrant alone on stage talking badly about his own country and/or blaming Europe for the misfortunes of the world.



*Figure 2: The B-side (2019). Photo: Thomas Leden.*

Personally, this market situation depresses me.

What is the real political impact that such an artistic genre can provoke to change what the work itself denounces? Or is hypocrisy something inherent to the work of the artist/curator fragmented by immigration processes? Does the political nature of the contemporary art market impose itself as a narcissistic desire of the artist/curator to be on the “right side of history”? Why?

### **Second shit: the poverty pornography**

It is during the XIXth century that the paradigms of a setting in a standard of the world are elaborated, on the old and the new continent, whose visible part deviates at the same time a popular spectacle, a scientific lesson of things (through the emergence of the learned societies) and an explicit demonstration of the validity of the colonial hierarchies or the racial distinctions. As we progressively leave—with the abolitions—the time of slavery and enter the time of empires, the world order is organized between those who were exhibited and those who were spectators of the exhibitions.

Blanchard et al. (2002)

To try to answer some of these questions, I look to the work of the Dutch artist Renzo Martens, who decides to go to Congo to teach the communities there to profit from their misery. Renzo holds several photography workshops with Congolese people trying to convince them to sell the

images of their misery for their profit. He calls this project "Enjoy Poverty" (2008). Obviously, the project fails in its main goal, firstly because of the very definition of "profit" as a Western concept, which is not necessarily part of all cultures in the world; and secondly, and more importantly, Renzo's work is fundamentally dependent on the existence of poverty. In other words, if there were no misery in Congo, Renzo's work would not exist.

It is in this pornographic co-dependence that the dilemma of this essay is presented. The work of non-European immigrants who propose to answer the political questions of their contexts of origin depends fundamentally on the misery they are criticizing. We present to the European audience the possibility of masturbating with the poverty presented on stage, so that when they ejaculate they can finally feel the narcissistic pleasure of being on the "right side of history."

And this is where a market bubble is created: condemning immigrant artists to think in supposed solutions (or denunciations) of problems created by the continent in which we are presenting our works. And such a bubble gives us an illusory feeling that the work for a fairer world is being carried out.

A possible parallel to be drawn in this regard is the ecological idea of "recycling." The idea that every human being on Planet Earth is responsible for their garbage gives us the false feeling that we are doing something to stop the infamous climate change. But we know that our individual production impacts the environment in a very microscopic way compared to waste emissions by large corporations. Lately, I have seen the political work of non-Europeans (my own included) as "recycling": an irrelevant, neoliberal action that does not bring concrete changes in the problem that the action criticizes. It would be like saying that we're all here playing a very blind game, thinking we're agents of change.

If we could trace a totalizing and moralizing psychological profile, it would be like saying that the contemporary political artist/curator navigates between the poles of vanity and naivety. We are lost.

### **Third Shit: Contemporary Human Zoo**

Dancing itself is far from being considered an innocent means of expression, and in the 1870s, doctors insisted on its relationship to hysteria. Dr. Henri Dagonet, for example, noted that 'among the numerous singularities of hysterical epidemics, there is a pronounced tendency to dance' (Dagonet 20). In 1865, when the number of cases of hysteria began to rise dramatically, a woman dancing at the Eldorado cafe-concert last compared by Edmond de Goncourt to the hysterical inmates at the Salpêtrière hospital because of her 'heated bestiality, [...] wild mane, [...] big mouth and the toothy laugh of a Bacchante' (Goncourt 62). Hysteria in the last third of the nineteenth century was a spectacular disease. The neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot divided the major hysterical attack into four stages. The first is epileptoid because its movements resemble the convulsive movements of epilepsy. Clown-ism (where the body contortions itself into all sorts of aerobic poses) is the second stage. In the third and fourth stages, the hysteric hallucinates and strikes theatrical poses.

Gordon (2009)

The importance and influence of art in the processes of maintaining Patriarchy and White Supremacy are already well known. I like to say that art, in our case Theatre, was kidnapped by the countless Poetics written in the last millennia, which legislate what is or what is not theatre. In this process of capture, numerous misrepresentations and domestications of bodies occurred. If we look at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, such claims are scientifically proven, because the role of the "spectacle" in the birth of Western institutions of power is clear. To give a few examples: the popularization of Science through Darwinian scientific spectacles; the historical connections between hysteria and modern dance; and the aesthetic influence of human zoos on European avant-garde artists.

Recently, I have been mentoring a group of theatre students in Ghent, Belgium. We gave ourselves the task to carry out an in-depth study of the aesthetics and politics of the Extreme Right, focusing on the North American Alt-Right phenomenon and, with the help of researcher Carolina Nóbrega, to draw a direct historical line between all these ideologies from the 19th Century to contemporary times.

In our understanding, there is no overcoming in History. Colonialism, Nazism, slavery have never been overcome, they are open wounds that will never close. What we see today are updates to structures created in the past. We understand that the North American anti-Nazi political project after the Second World War was not a salvation, but a replacement of operating and oppressive powers through neoliberal ideologies produced in the Cold War (which should be called the Hot War, since in Latin America and the Middle East war was real and deadly).

The Human Zoos of the past centuries have never been surpassed and in this sense, I invite the reader to ask an absurd question that doesn't get out of my head: what are the possible entanglements (besides the moral context) we can find between the Human Zoos of the last century and the International Contemporary Theater Festivals in Europe?

O golpe é o mesmo, só muda a vítima.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Furious Rodrigo Batista* was made in the first year of my Masters degree at DAS Theatre in the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam.

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## Biography

Rodrigo Batista is a Brazilian theatre maker and educator based in Amsterdam. In the context of the DAS Theatre Master Programme, he developed a collection of pieces aiming at bringing insurrection into the performance space. Previous to his work in Europe, he worked for over 10 years with his São Paulo-based group "[pH2]: estado de teatro". They presented theatrical investigations in dialogue with philosophy, cinema and dance, which received several grants and prizes. Rodrigo presented works in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Moreover, he worked as a theatre educator in several cultural and social programmes in São Paulo. <https://www.portfoliorodrigobatista.com/>

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## CHAMPURRIAS

PAULA MONTECINOS OLIVA INDEPENDENT ARTIST

 The present text was influenced by conversations, practices and creative processes shared with Johan Mijail, Flavia Pinheiro, Pedro Matias, Devika Chotoe, Veza Fernandez, Papaya Kuir Collective and accompanied by the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Eduard Glissant, Fred Moten and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, among others.

## n(i)e(u)ws

### *The time is up*

*la borradura del tiempo lineal*

*the succession of cycles enfolded in others cycles*

*of rhythms within rhythms*

*el tiempo de la catástrofe y el tiempo de la renovación*

*a two-folded movement and momentary cut*

### *Regeneration*

*intercranial pulse*

*intracranial spasm*

*the tidal ear*

*turning out*

*100 seconds cycle*

*calling-in*

*the molecular space*

*calling-out*

*the electric liquid rocks back*

*crossing the secret of the night*

What needs to be listened to and cannot be told?

*No es fácil estar aquí  
On the range of the tumbleweeds  
drifting along and spreading new toes  
scroll scroll  
a call to respond*

**mapping  
the  
interferen  
ce  
headscape  
sounds  
of things buried inside**

¿Qué hay para decir, que hay para escuchar? entre las trampas representativas y las coartadas del vocablo ¿Cómo siquiera confiar en el lenguaje implantado? ¿Cómo siquiera creer que las palabras ayudan al nombrarme? ni en el anglo y ni el español *no reversal coil  
no alternative to the violent substitution*

*desde este lado siempre seremos metonimia*

[ the strea



*Restaurar*  
pulsión intracraneal  
tiempo encefálico  
ciclos envueltos en otros ciclos  
fuerzas rítmicas

*superpuestas*  
*tissues calling in*  
*electric fluidsstream*

*the source of the sensation imprinting itself on the body of the land*  
no separation between the tenses  
no alibi  
homesick and stuck  
being both - flesh and ghost

**What do I know about** the bouncing waves of the strident death?  
**What do I know about** the human admixture?  
**What do I know about** the intimate knowledge to land?  
**What do I know about** the contrast that acts as an assertion?  
**What do I know about** what is shared through the language of secrets?

*Reexistencia*

*territorios arácnidos  
campos transductivos de reposición y permanencia  
restored and transmitted  
rechanneled strength expanding note by note*

*what forces move what forces?*

DESATAR LAS FUERZAS, ALTERAR LAS FORMAS si las cosas se mueven solo en un nivel, acaban por volver al mismo lugar.

repetir para ser cambiada  
repetir para ser cambiada  
repetir para ser cambiada  
repetir para ser cambiada  
repetir para ser cambiada  
repetir para ser cambiada

*La falta de reconocimiento enferma. Transitar el camino de la autonegación al autorreconocimiento es una constante herida. La sanación de una enfermedad hereditaria no es fácil. No es fácil estar aquí, no es fácil estar aquí, ni encontrar relatos liberado(re)s que ayudan a la autopreservación. No es fácil estar aquí*

*The quest: on should be repeated*

## *What force moves what force?*

tack tack tack k  
the wandering drums  
dance

practicing the (i) is the (u)  
practicing as an accessible action  
practicing because the owning of owings is bad fortune  
00000000 me indica que el camino está por venir.

## *What is left of the master in me?*

There is no outside of violence, no periphery to claim  
*(long ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh) high pitch ...*

## *Resilient*

intercranial space  
intracranial field  
encephalic sound

long tide

ele bebe, ele bebe e dorme..  
ele dorme siete dias...  
para ver hasta el fondo infinito de la oscuridad  
no hace falta cerrar lo ojos  
how do you name anaisa?



*The quest: on should be repeated*

there  
your invisible whiteness  
waiting to be betrayed

the burning mantle

What do you know about .....being raised for inheritance?  
What do you know about people adjusting to your mother tongue?  
What do you know about .....trusting so deeply you won't disappear?  
What do you know about the world being created by your kind for your kind?  
What do you know about living by owning your owings?

What do you know about                    b l                    i m                    e  
O f the plac e                    no                    re t                    ur n  
the                    refus                    al o                    f tra                    nsp a                    re                    n                    c                    y

bella alma ...lejos de la binaria calma, la compleja transfusión de la memoria.  
atravesarse, atravesarme, dejarme mover, ritualizar el cuerpo, el día a día, dejarse  
hablar por las huellas, por la convivencia con los pulsos y los misterios que van y vienen.  
de más allá a más allá, de más acá a más acá. y así el ser casi, lo casi dicho, lo casi  
olvidado, lo no asociado, lo rebatido por el presente, sigue en espera.

### *Internal displacement is the first step of migration*

no translation

just transduction

*El momento de partir no es siempre una decisión, a veces el desplazamiento comienza antes de ser notado, a veces esa decisión es menos libre de lo que se pensaba... es quizás una relación con la falta o quizás una memoria de fuga. Un movimiento que comienza muy cerca y revolotea muy lejos.*

*What is left of the master in me?*

*The quest: on should be repeated*

potential musicality hidden inside the bodies.. layers came to the surface  
the noise box calls again

get innn iiitttt... get into itttt  
to the power of the tooooooonguee, ton ton tongggggggg

swallowing the wwwords...  
the fluid voidd, the looong shadowww, the raw ggrrrrrrrrr

## Biography

Paula Montecinos Oliva is a Chilean choreographer, sonic artist and researcher based in Amsterdam. She works with sound, bodies, vibrations and transduction to explore the performativity, agency and mobilizing potential of movement, voice and embodiment. Her research includes the experimentation with sonic technologies, written matter and somatic movement, creating hybrid formats of performances, concerts and installation that aim to create spaces of relationality beyond the individual. Current projects involve the work with anarchival sonic practices, as counter-narrative to hegemonic and monotonic worldviews and epistemologies. Paula's work has been presented in art institutions, independent venues and public spaces in Chile, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and England. She graduated from the MA DAS Choreography at the Amsterdam University of the Arts, teaches somatic movement laboratories and works as an artistic advisor in creative process.

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## REFLECTIONS ON CURATORIAL ARTICULATION PRACTICES. A COLLECTIVE DOING: THAT'S WHY I DON'T WRITE ALONE

MARIO LOPES DAS GRADUATE SCHOOL, AMSTERDAM

This writing is not, nor will ever be, genuinely mine: I gather, I agglomerate; in conversations I rethink; in encounters I revise ideas; in movement I reshape things; I use and disuse theories and definitions; I quote those I call by name and honour those who shared ideas and their existence with me in non-linear times. All this is present in the words that follow and especially in my doing.

For a long time, the term "curator" has triggered noises and conflicts in me. I question the practices and market logics operating within our viral system, which I call PACACO-bi: Patriarchy, Capitalism and Colonialism within a binary structure. I name "PACACO-bi" this syndemic virus of our history, which affects us as humanity and governs us as a society.

For this reason, considering myself a curator is a permanent conflict in each experience where I act as such. I try to exercise a curatorial practice that, on principle, combats this viral system, constantly asking myself: Is it possible to break with the logics immanent to the capitalist system, at the same time freeing myself from the patriarchal place of power? Is it possible to overcome the binary logic and colonial methods of action pervading social relations?

I constantly wonder about the relationships created from these systemic structures, where architectural and institutional constructions, associated with institutionalised bodies and financial capital, impose power over curatorial practices, artists, multidisciplinary teams and 'publics'. What is the nature of these relations and how can they be transformed? What are the consequences of these mechanisms and how to consciously oppose them?

I see these relationships, for the most part, as vertically toxic and violent. I think of verticality as the idea of power overlapping existences, dreams and desires from top to bottom. According to these vectors, different roles are constructed. This is also the role of the curator who, while providing spaces and budgets on the one hand, is also able to oppress, format and discard practices, on the other.

Taking these reflections as a starting point, I question my work. My whole practice seeks to dismantle this syndemic structure.

Time is a key factor in curatorial practices. I remember that within *veiculoSUR*, an itinerant residency platform active since 2015 and coordinated by me, we had several transformative encounters, but a special occasion marked me. Through the encounter with a wise holder of ancestry and deep knowledge of the technologies of the Indigenous peoples, I came into contact with another understanding of timeline, which definitely transformed my practices.

How do we—western or westernized—locate past, present and future with our bodies as a starting point? We have learned and been trained to construct the past behind us, the present at this exact point we are and the future as being in front of us. What I learned then, and have been reconstructing and repairing within my brain architecture, is the possibility of inverting these senses. Today I understand the future as something that lies behind us and, as much as we cannot see it, we can feel the vibrations of those who have already passed by our present point and continue to drive us (our ancestry). The present, on the other hand, is at the nearest edge of our body, and the past would be in front of us, where everything we generate in presence ceaselessly makes up the fabric of our everyday life. That is, we are facing our memory and history, thus confronting the consequences of our doing—permanently.

I need to redefine and reuse the word "curatorship" through my practices. Curating, for me, means going through some specific steps. I will explain how I think of them, what understanding of relationships they contain and therefore what ways of doing they generate:

## 1.

### **Displacing myself from my own place, in space-time, to meet with other places and existences and open myself to crossings**

In physics, the **displacement** of a body is a vector quantity (it has modulus and direction) defined as the variation of the position of a body in a given interval of time. Thus, the displacement vector can be obtained by the difference between the initial and final position. If an object moves with respect to a referent, then the position of the object varies. This change in position is known as displacement.

**Choreography** is the planning and organising of the movements of bodies and objects in space-time and generating a trace, path, writing or record. Displacement as choreography is a technology

that comes from the desire or need for changes and transformations of scenarios(out), states(in) and dream activations.

### Displacement as choreography

To think of transtopia as a transformative power is to think of it as a starting point and not as a destination. This implies an exercise of displacement and, therefore, it requires a repositioning of our senses and meanings to enter the other-place and the other-history. This exercise requires special attention to reproduce choreographic thought – in displacement; that is, to choreograph our movements as ways of learning how to move in other directions.

## 2.

### To wish and dream of meeting up again with those who have passed through me and left traces or fragments

I started talking to the trees again. When I was 40 years old, I was living in Helsinki. Walking towards the Baltic Sea I slipped and leaned on a tree. At the same moment, flashes of memories came to me. I remembered my dear grandmother, Rita Nery, when I was about 5 years old, taking my hand and putting it on a tree, her hand on mine and she started singing. She whispered in my ear: son, you can talk to the trees. Western time passed by my mind: the PACACO-bi chip was already implanted in my mind and the disbelief of my grandmother's teachings completely materialised. Only at the age of 40, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the Baltic Sea and near the Arctic Sea, did I dream the past, reactivate the matriarchal-ancestral technology and start talking to the trees again.

 <https://vimeo.com/487755188>

Wishing and dreaming of re-encounters makes it possible for me to meet people who make me dream of the past and speculate about futures; reuniting with people that displace me and generate conflicts. It makes it possible to meet existences that reactivate matriarchal-ancestral technologies and allow us to afro-transcend. The re-encounters are the desire to architect the aquilombing of a commune on a route of escape from this time.

### 3.

#### To plan and articulate reunions through a structured platform for the deepening of our intersections (of that which makes me wish and dream)

To describe the intercalation of my work as curator and creator, as choreographer and performer, I use the terms **articulator-choreographer** and **choreographer-articulator**, whose fundamental idea is to articulate bodies, spaces, ideas and people.

Choreographic articulation creates spaces of interference and allows encounter, sharing, conflict, reflection, displacement and construction of other narratives. I seek to build spaces of collectivity, residences of coexistence, entangled localities and mobile formats of sharing practices and responsibilities.

As a choreographer and performer I invite other bodies to interfere in my corporeal investigation through the notion of articulated choreography, promoting the encounter with several artists in different locations. I experiment in displacement, challenging hegemonic aesthetic formats, taking as a starting point the social and historical inscriptions embedded in my own body.

### 4.

#### Agglomerate existences in the same space-time

I build a relationship first of all with people and not with works-objects.

I build a relationship primarily with embodied existences and not concrete architectures or physical institutional spaces.

I build a relationship out of desires and trust, out of many conversations, food and shared residences.

I build encounters between people, trusting them.

I thought I built collectives, but now I think I deconstruct individualities.

### 5.

#### Stimulate and provoke an experience, to ferment, to conflict ideas and to dismantle patterns

I have been researching and investigating "conflicts of social norms and strange bodies": mobility, encounters, crossroads and compositions, social norms and their repercussions on the body and movement. I constantly try to recognize, despite distances and differences, other ways of creating

and converging ideas that displace my own actions. Although this coming and going does not always imply the cognitive opening necessary for the apprehension of other worlds, the strength of the act is to position myself within the reach of the senses: to dislocate the body is to expose myself to sensations not yet experienced. The contact with diverse realities, together with the occupation of distinct architectural spaces and the relationship with those who live here/there, are opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, for the estrangement of myself and for the artistic creation from constantly renewed points of view.

I did not study cultural management, nor was I trained as a choreographer. The in-between place I occupy demands from me constant readaptation and well-articulated movements. The anatomical terminology of "articulation" describes this intermediate place as a point of union that, at the same time, guarantees great mobility to all the connected parts in the body.

### Exploding pre-established ways of doing

**Strange bodies and conflict of norms** is an investigation of the social codes of behaviour, processes of physical adaptation and moments of confrontation with the body that are perceived as foreign on account of language, skin colour or ways of being. Those who are recognised as foreigners seek strategies of camouflage that allow them to enter and penetrate 'norms'.

The codes of a society or a place change according to current aesthetics, ethics and fears. Bodies at borders are subjected to physical/psychological tests. The strange bodies that perform the codes are plunged into a process of integration, where integration means the attempt to disintegrate the newly arrived body from its own culture.

After the research of 'foreign bodies', I started to understand that it is only through entering into conflict with norms that it is possible to signal a path towards another social construction. One of the striking examples during my life and period of social integration in Munich was in the official social integration course: there I met people from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa.

One day a colleague asked the teacher if she had correctly prepared an invitation in German. The invitation was to a neighbouring family, whom she did not know yet, as she had just moved into her new flat. The teacher, when reading the invitation, promptly corrected my colleague, saying that: "here in Germany you cannot knock on the door of a neighbour you don't know and invite him to your house for lunch. The neighbour is not your friend. We have to respect other people's spaces." As I asked how it was possible for her to say that, she replied, "it is our culture, it is our rules, our norms and it is my responsibility to teach our customs."

Resisting norms, questioning what is given or the 'how-should-be', is the only way to build a society where people do not simply co-exist but can live the complex and liberating interface of relating to others.

**Visualise the scattered and chaotic fragments as a landscape. Contemplate them collectively for as long as necessary**

I enter into conflict with norms and do not follow the apparently given norms (as they are often not put into question). I stand for value of knowledge in time and not for value of money in time. I seek to build a continuous relationship with others: one that relies on non-linear time rather than an extractive relationship to the present.

**Discreate. To perceive the organic intersections generated by fragments, remnants or traces in space-time.**

Today, capitalist economies pressure us to be creative at all costs. And this practice of building an individualistic creative being leads us to being gladiatorial in the arenas we enter until we wither, atrophy and disintegrate. To discreate is to generate something—without thinking of creating—in relation to other people and their ways of doing. Discreation is the practice of doing in community.

*Do not confuse drifting with being lost. Enjoying the drift is the best part of the journey.*

## 6.

### **Caring for and accompanying transformation processes triggered in collective gatherings and experiences**

Since 2008, together with the articulator Maelys Meyer, I conduct the platformPLUS, in which artists and curators stay together in residence experiencing the collective process of living together and discreating.

In parallel, since 2015, I coordinate, with my partners Marcela Olate, Maelys Meyer and Thais Ushirobira, the *veiculoSUR*, an itinerant residence that builds a displacement from South to North from Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, France, Germany and Finland.

In both projects, the practice is of continuity: the realisation of new layers activated by the artists in each edition. A great spiral, where everyone sees themselves composing, is being formed. From the first collective experience a relational interface is built, which will continue for a lifetime. We are talking about building spaces for training, sharing technologies, fermenting strategies, re-appropriating ownership of one's own existence, counter-academicism and an Afrotransstropic community.

## 7.

### **Linking spaces for sharing tracks, the point of being and what has been generated during the journey**

*Stop listening to the future and project the past.*

How to share what has been generated with institutions? How to invite them to the projects and ideas and involve them as an integrative part? How to do projects not “for” or “by”, but with institutions?

In the public call for the current edition of the *veiculoSUR 2020/21/22*, open in six different countries, we invited representatives of all collaborating institutions to be part of the meetings with the artists interested in being part of this 3-year displacement. The important thing was to create relationships with the people involved and strengthen the process: to create a connection, a close dialogue and a listening practice to get in touch with who they are, whereof and with whom they come. The aim was to disarticulate the obligation of a final product, and to stimulate the desire to accompany these people and to share the process of each artist.

From this relationship building, the unfolding and reverberations of the experiences lived in the residence will be constantly monitored.

## 8.

### Alienation, the Earth and Humanity

The term **humanity** refers to the whole of the human species, the whole formed by "we" human beings, but not only that; **humanity** also refers to human acts of compassion and solidarity, acts in which we are able to help our neighbour.

The construction of this humanity is bankrupt. This PACACO-bi virus alienates us. It teaches us a timeline where the future is in front of us and the past behind, which makes it impossible for us to build futures considering the past, as it seems to fall into oblivion. Native peoples understand time from another logic, where the past is in front of us and the future behind.

With the past in front of us, everything we build and generate in the present makes up the fabric of history and memory. Visualising the past that we weave, our responsibility with all the actions, bodies, objects and components also comes into view. With the future on our backs we cannot see it, but we feel the accumulated energy that goes through our bodies to keep us dreaming and active in the construction of the present. Our bodies in this in-between place are transtopic, they allow transit and movement for the construction of the present, intertwining desires and dreams for a future.

As Ailton Krenak (2021) says, in this idea of Humanity, we separate Humanity from the Earth (Nature). We consider the earth/nature as a resource and not as part of a whole. The rivers, mountains and trees for this humanity are resources and for the Indigenous peoples they are part of the community, they are a grandmother or grandfather or any member that transits to another plane.

## 9.

### **Then, my own reconstruction, reorganisation and recomposition of yet another mutant body in constant movement.**

I was taught that dreaming is utopian. Afrotranstopia is first of all realisation. It is a political question of making dreams said to be distant to black existences. The real utopia is to think of a world where existences can execute their own being. We are children of a technology of original peoples from both sides of the Atlantic. We speculate our future of Black bodies.

From this speculation and dreaming grows Afrotranstopia. Afrotranstopia is this intersection between technologies, existences and afrotranscendence.

\*\*\*

this text is not, nor has ever been genuinely mine:

it will be reused, added to; in conversations, remembered; in encounters, revisited; in movement, experienced; and used to construct theses and denominations, to drive other ideas and practices and to follow interconnections, leftovers and foams to be recreated all the time.

### **Works Cited**

Krenak, Ailton. 2021. *Interview Roda Viva with Ailton Krenak*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtPbCuPKTq4>

### **Biography**

Mario Lopes is a Brazilian born in São Paulo choreographer, articulator and master student at DAS Choreography - Amsterdam University of the Arts. After more than 15 choreographic works realised in Brazil, Germany, France, Mexico, Switzerland and Finland I am now working on the last part of my trilogy called "Movimento" in collaboration with artists from São Paulo, Munich, Maputo, Helsinki and Lyon. Due to the pandemic, "Movimento III\_Celebration, post-tsunami foams", became a choreographed film, premiered in August 2021 at FRESTAS, Contemporary Art Triennial of SESC São Paulo, in Brazil, and embraces the concept of Afrotranstopia, which I keep developing with the support of a large collective of Afrodiasporic artists. At the moment, besides developing a digital platform for dance creation with my partner Victor Pardino, CEO of Sense of Space, I am working on the adaptation of the film for the stage.

Recent awards and grants: [2022] NPN Stepping Out [2021] Einzelprojektförderung für Freie Tanzschaffende, Kulturreferat München [2021] AVEK - Förderung von Filmproduktionen in Helsinki [2021] Grant Holland Scholarship [2020] Stipendium - Kulturreferat München

<https://mariolopesvs.com/>

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PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## O PENSAMENTO SELVAGEM [THE SAVAGE MIND / LA PENSÉE SAUVAGE]

FLAVIA PINHEIRO ARTISTA INDEPENDENTE

### Entre papagaios, araras, urubus e carcarás

“Um antílope de um novo tipo foi encontrado na África por um explorador que conseguiu capturar um indivíduo e trazê-lo para a Europa [...] O animal é colocado vivo em uma gaiola e catalogado. Uma vez morto, ele será empalhado e preservado” (Briet 1951, 10).

Acredito que esse não foi um bom começo. Vou recomeçar.

Vou lhes contar uma história sobre aqueles que não deveriam estar aqui (minha própria história, sobre não pertencer)—porque eu devo, porque é o único lugar vazio para mim. Eu tenho que compartilhar a violência que era invisível antes da minha chegada aqui. Vou explicar novamente, mas de outra forma (isso não é verdade). Não será a última vez. Eu posso mudar a história (talvez isso também não seja verdade): vou repetir, interromper, cair e morrer. Essa é uma história sobre como me tornei uma desordeira ou um pássaro zangado.

*Quando a violência é invisível porque não estávamos aqui.*

Eras e eras atrás, antes que o primeiro barco pudesse ser visto na costa cintilante do novo mundo, papagaios pintaram paisagens do outro lado do Atlântico. Em uma noite de inverno, houve também uma história. Um estudante de uma conhecida instituição de arte estava sentado na cozinha da casa onde agora eu vivo: com uma voz melódica, suave, acariciadora, doce barítono, consistente, o estudante estava narrando o quão fabulosa e fantástica sua experiência tinha sido até então na Faculdade, porque todos eram tão educados e prestativos. Eles encontraram espaço

para se desenvolver e aprofundar suas práticas (exatamente o que estavam procurando) para aprimorar suas carreiras e, com o feedback dos colegas, tutores e funcionários, foram capazes de expandir seu envolvimento no campo da arte.

Sem fôlego, lutando em uma encruzilhada.

*Você já sofreu alguma violência lá? De forma alguma. Muito pelo contrário.*

*A violência não existe se nós não estivermos lá.*

Carcará / Pega, mata e come / Carcará/ Não vai morrer de fome / Carcará / Mais coragem do que homem / Carcará/ Pega, mata e come

- João Do Vale e José Cândido, "Carcará"



Figure 1: Glitch

A técnica cultural ocidental de documentação é o que vem antes desta experiência; o documento é o aparato tecnológico que diz respeito ao Estado-nação liberal e serve para manter suas estruturas. Esta escrita tenta complexificar as relações entre minha prática artística e as macroestruturas invisíveis do poder, como o documento (prova de existência), com um grito estridente, um nó no pescoço, uma angústia profunda e uma melancolia naufragante. A maioria das instituições culturais reproduzem desigualdades sociais, de gênero, de raça e de classe, principalmente como forma de manter o poder; neste caso específico: aquelas criadas pelas mudanças coreográficas do sul para o norte, a reprodução colonial do cativo, do arquivo, da categorização. Com um procedimento analítico a frio—capturando in vitro, morto ou vivo—todas as formas de vida urgentes são enquadradas em termos puramente técnicos, como internacionalização, inclusão e diversidade.

Entre perfis, pratos de petri, vogelhuisje, catálogos zoológicos, estufas e macacos.

Ainda estamos aqui?

## O Futuro da Pesquisa Artística: EM VIVO

Decidi fugir do in vitro, do vidro, do estúdio e das paredes da instituição e fui embora encarnando um pássaro, um prisioneiro nascido em cativeiro que nunca aprendeu a voar e quase morreu neste novo ambiente hostil. Um pássaro que só se queixa de abusos de poder ou de condições desiguais revela a falha da instituição em lidar e reconhecer que expõe e nomeia o pássaro como zangado, incapaz de voar, hermético, complexo, exótico, único e violento.

A exposição de exóticos em cativeiro acontece de forma micropolítica com bactérias, aves, plantas e seres humanos. Esta prática de colocar seres “exóticos” em exposição começou na Europa no início do período moderno, quando os exploradores europeus se dirigiram a todos os cantos do globo. Os marinheiros trouxeram consigo pessoas das áreas recém exploradas, da mesma forma que trouxeram por objetos estranhos, plantas, e animais a serem apresentados para provar o exotismo e a riqueza de países anteriormente desconhecidos. Junto com a apresentação de seres humanos individuais, grandes exposições foram organizadas a partir do século XVI. Gostaria de contar outra história, na qual a recusa é o conhecimento corporificado da experiência de uma voz coletiva que voa; “ingovernável” como diriam Fred Moten e Sadiya Hartman. Uma história de recusa.

É verdade que a pesquisa artística se assemelha a parques de animais e estufas, prosperando em um estado de cativeiro que é classificado em catálogos de zoológicos e fotos de perfil? Dentro de suas exposições, os candidatos, funcionários e tutores que honram sua herança específica e sua formação utilizam o conceito de representação. Ao mesmo tempo, a falta da pluralidade de vozes para desenvolver metodologias, pedagogias e referências de conteúdo mais amplas continuam a perpetuar um campo restrito de paisagens estrangeiras. De uma perspectiva, este sistema educacional estabelece formas de disciplina, violência, punição e contenção que provocam danos não quantificáveis. Por outro lado, é possível desenhar coreografias fugitivas dentro das fronteiras institucionais, para abrir portais nos quais podemos imaginar planos impossíveis, linhas, danças e camadas de fuga juntas; uma tecnologia compartilhada poderia ser uma forma comum de habitar este espaço como um refúgio. Uma ontologia da fugitividade opera na intersecção dos estudos negros e estudos feministas interseccionais como uma performance de resistência aos sistemas de conhecimento.

Este ensaio é uma tentativa de perguntar—em uma tecnologia de palavras frustrada e submersa, afundada em lágrimas e em nome daqueles que nunca tiveram o direito de viver ou que não pertencem, ou daqueles que nunca estiveram aqui, para aqueles que morreram logo após o nascimento—o que poderia ser se sonhássemos e agíssemos juntos, rumo à indisciplina e à ruptura das macroestruturas.

No encontro, a lentidão e a suavidade estão em oposição àquelas descritas como rápidas, afiadas e barulhentas. Neste encontro, a gramática da exclusão torna-se visível: com estes parâmetros, baseados na hierarquia de uma cosmologia específica, os suaves e lentos têm permissão para executar e legitimar a violência em direção ao rápido, veloz e alto, e à multidão de corpos que são

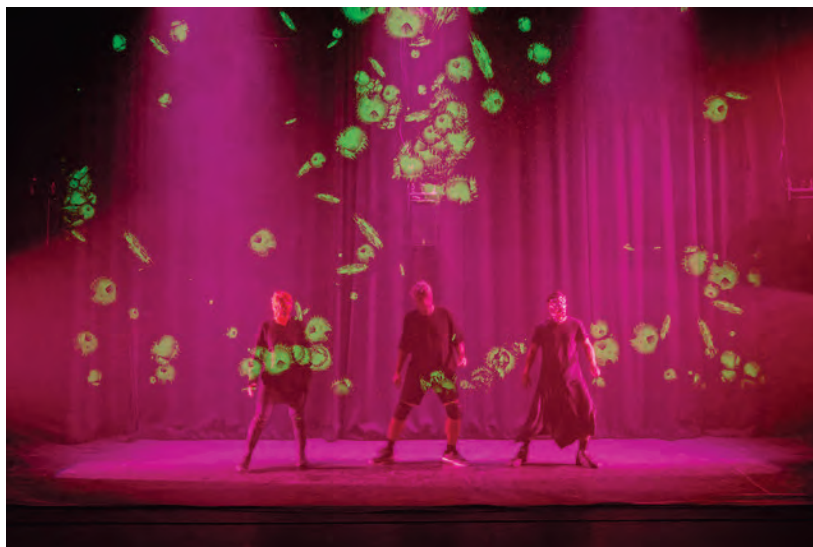
inquieta e desafinada. E assim, um regime de invisibilidade é criado e perpetuado. O antílope, por exemplo, em estado de dança, com sua poderosa musculatura dos membros inferiores, pode permanecer sublime mesmo em alta velocidade. Sempre com medo, sempre bonito, mesmo quando corre no rebanho, recusa teimosamente a quietude, pois a urgência de permanecer vivo está incrustada em sua carne.

Ei, você aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí / Ei, você aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí

- Glauco Silva Ferreira, Homero Silva Ferreira,  
e Ivan Silva Ferreira, Me dá Um Dinheiro Aí”

Talvez seja possível desenvolver aqui como esta estrutura neoliberal tentou matar a dança, assassinar o movimento, destruir os deslocamentos transatlânticos impossíveis, e todas as suas futuridades coreográficas. Ela também se transformou em pobreza: a pleora, potência, exuberância, resistência, calor, vitalidade, destreza, suor, lágrimas e dor, exotizando a carne em pornografia. Talvez não, devido à impossibilidade de relações dentro dos deslocamentos vulcânicos, fissuras, rupturas, explosões, floresta tropical, umidade e contaminação que transformaram a RAIVA em AÇÃO, criando uma ruptura, uma bomba, uma dinamite.

Para uma bactéria vinda de um contexto altamente contagioso do sul; transladada e deslocada neste experimento in vitro chamado “realidade”, as opções disponíveis seriam morte imediata ou um modo de sobrevivência mutante transmutado em ritmo, velocidade, nitidez e precisão em uma coreografia radical. As bactérias juntas também podem mudar o ambiente. Eu estava imerso em uma placa de petri, um tubo de ensaio neste reino; e todos os meus movimentos, pensamentos, desejos e espécies companheiras desapareceram, escafederam-se. Eu esqueci tudo. Estava sob controle e vigilância dos “verdadeiros cientistas” que estavam nomeando, descrevendo, catalogando, comentando, redigindo, categorizando, compreendendo, lendo, escutando, analisando e criticando.



*Figure 2: 7 Solos for 11 Bacterias Falling Through*

Não posso me lembrar.  
Sou um pássaro nascido em cativo,  
tranquilamente melancólico  
com o perpétuo sonho de liberdade  
Eu sou colonizado  
Eu mal consigo ver através das barras de raiva  
com minhas asas cortadas  
Mal posso fazer vôos rasos  
desta condição in vitro  
preso  
com lágrimas sufocando na minha garganta  
Eu invejo aqueles que voam livremente, que se aglomeram  
que nunca foram catalogados  
Eu esqueci como cantar e nunca aprendi a voar  
Nasci em um cativo, em um país estrangeiro e me esquartejei.  
de um túmulo de sonhos  
Eu estou constantemente gritando um pesadelo  
sempre com raiva porque não consigo sentir a brisa.  
Embora eu seja um pássaro, não posso voar. Decidi usar a mesma tecnologia: vamos escrever,  
ouvir e ler. “As ferramentas do mestre nunca desmontarão a casa do mestre”, disse Audre Lorde.  
E se dormirmos e sonharmos juntos? Não estamos todos mortos a esta altura? Eles podem sentir  
alguma coisa? Podemos sentir alguma coisa?  
Congelamento, quietude, a quem pertence a lentidão?  
Não consigo me lembrar.  
Vou lhes contar outra história sobre pássaros...

As pegas são normalmente sedentárias e passam invernos perto dos seus territórios de nidificação, mas as aves que vivem perto do limite norte de sua região na Suécia, Finlândia e Rússia podem se mover para o sul em condições climáticas adversas. As pegas têm sido observados participando de elaborados rituais sociais, possivelmente incluindo a expressão de tristeza (dor/luto). O auto-reconhecimento espelhado foi demonstrado nas pegas europeias, tornando-as uma das poucas espécies a possuir esta capacidade. Sua inteligência é equivalente à dos grandes símios (chimpanzés, gorilas e orangotangos) em termos de cognição social, raciocínio causal, flexibilidade, imaginação e prospecção. Elas estão em toda parte aqui na Holanda. Um dia eu estava voando baixo e encontrei uma ferida aberta, uma “Pega” esmagada, atropelada com as tripas de fora. Lembrei-me das cores, das frutas, do samba, do Zé Carioca, da Carmen Miranda, do Rio, e do Carnaval brasileiro.

Entre Papangus, Caretas e La Ursa.

Ei pessoal / Ei moçada /Carnaval começa no Galo da Madrugada. / Ei pessoal / Ei moçada / Carnaval começa no Galo da Madrugada.

- “Hino do Galo da Madrugada”

“Um documento é a prova de um fato” (Briet 1951, 9).

Quero destacar a semelhança das tecnologias coloniais disfarçadas de experimentos científicos no arquivamento de espécies, macacos humanos, objetos e artefatos. Declaro guerra contra este processo através da expressão de uma perspectiva micro, como se segue:

O que acontece quando se isola uma bactéria do seu ambiente biológico habitual é que, embora ela não possa prever completa ou precisamente os efeitos sobre todo um organismo, ela permite uma análise mais conveniente para os cientistas. Experimentos de laboratório também verificaram que quando algumas bactérias são expostas a uma grande quantidade de antibióticos, elas se tornam superbactérias. As tentativas anestésicas de sintonizá-las, desacelerá-las e adaptá-las não as põem a dormir, mas as deixam realmente, realmente irritadas. Neste sentido, a mente selvagem contribuiu para esta tecnologia ao enquadrar intelectualmente e através de uma metodologia sofisticada uma compreensão particular do mundo: uma forma de analisar, distinguir e classificar; uma lógica baseada em dialética e raciocínio que nem sempre servem às cosmovisões do “sul global”.

Minha prática, chamada *Tentativas de sobreviver na apnéia*, lida com uma série de pontuações que abordam várias constrições aéreas em áreas insalubres de alto risco (não seguras de forma alguma). A apnéia é um bloqueio do fluxo de ar em um indivíduo, e os efeitos resultantes (falta de oxigenação, pressão arterial elevada e uma sensação geral de asfixia), destacam uma noção somático-política de “apnéia” de uma condição geral de existência dos indivíduos racializados em uma situação colonizada. O que é respirar em um mundo sufocado por hegemonias tóxicas e por catástrofes ecológicas e sanitárias? Você sabia que as mitocôndrias respirando oxigênio são vestígios das primeiras bactérias mutantes vivendo em simbiose? Devido aos esforços fotossintéticos das bactérias, o planeta tem uma atmosfera com oxigênio, permitindo que um gás venenoso seja traduzido em brisas agradáveis, mantendo vivos araras, papagaios e pegas. A questão é como imaginar uma possível coreografia a partir desta apnéia: Como respirar fundo e sentir a brisa?

O que aprendemos desta relação simbiótica institucional é que se um texto pode dar palavras a algo—uma dificuldade, uma violência, uma injustiça, uma dinâmica—ou se ele pode dar nome a algo que ainda não foi nomeado exatamente da mesma maneira, então as pessoas o encontrarão, mesmo que não encontrem um fio condutor no idioma; elas o agarrarão; persistirão com ele.

Ouvi dizer que o mundo vai-se acabar / Que tudo vai pra cucuia / O sol não mais  
brilhará  
Mas se deixarem / Um bombo e uma mulata / É um trombone de prata O frevo  
bom viverá  
Pode acabar o petróleo Pode acabar a vergonha  
Pode acabar tudo enfim Mas deixem o frevo pra mim.

- Capiba, “Trombone de Prata”

Voltando à Faculdade: a possibilidade de aprender com os colegas da instituição poderia ser lida como uma contaminação de microorganismos. Um se transforma em milhões, e as existências plurais se tornam visíveis através da modificação de um e do outro. Mas o conhecimento como algo que é construído e transformado coletivamente só pode ser mantido em um ambiente de aprendizagem entre pares se o entorno não sabotar a generosidade e a resiliência por um processo de atomização e isolamento. Os mecanismos da instituição devem ser transparentes: o acesso aos recursos precisa contribuir para a comunidade, não para enraizar preconceitos, mas para encorajar a reflexão e a tomada de decisões comuns para diminuir as desigualdades de classe, gênero e raça. Um vocabulário comum é necessário para abordar estas questões a partir de uma posição anti-racista, anti-colonial, para reconhecer privilégios e decisões estéticas baseadas em declarações hegemônicas dentro do campo da arte.

Tornar-se um bando de aves não deve ser uma conquista impossível. O intercâmbio institucionalizado entre os pares deve visar um motim ou uma celebração evitando qualquer feedback que possa ser comportamental e descritivo; comentando e criticando práticas como se um “vocabulário neutro” pudesse existir tende à exotização e categorização. A atomização - ou anti-agrupamento—é uma tecnologia especificamente projetada para atingir aqueles que só podem sobreviver em bandos e enxames. Quando as aves espalham as sementes das árvores florestais entre nós... Como descreve Nelly Wat, Sara Ahmed—em sua palestra “Complaint as Queer Method”—retorna continuamente à metáfora de uma caixa postal “ocupada por aves nidificando, que ela usa para visualizar o que uma reclamação pode parecer; a caixa postal, embora não tenha sido criada para as aves que nidificam dentro dela, torna-se um abrigo seguro. No entanto, o ninho também pode ser perturbado pelas cartas dentro dele” (Wat 2019: np). Citando Ahmed: “Sabemos tanto da tentativa de transformar os mundos que não nos acomodam”. Mas essa luta também pode ser muito dura. Quando temos de lutar pela existência, podemos acabar sentindo que lutar é a nossa existência. E por isso, precisamos uns dos outros. Precisamos nos tornar os recursos um do outro” (Ahmed em Wat 2019, n.p.).

South Boom Boom é uma tentativa de sobreviver na apnéia, um trabalho contínuo, uma possibilidade de reimaginar o mundo, uma forma de escapar do cativeiro, desenhar linhas fugitivas, resistir, voar, conceber resistências, migrar, reinventar uma catástrofe, deformar as formas de opressão através do tempo.



*Figure 3: 7 Solos for Bacteria Falling Through*

# THE SAVAGE MIND

## Entre papagaios, araras, urubus e carcarás

“An antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer who has succeeded in capturing an individual and bringing it to Europe [...] The living animal is placed in a cage and catalogued. Once it is dead it will be stuffed and preserved” (Briet 1951, 10).

I believe it was not a good beginning. I will start over again.

I will tell you a story about the ones who were not supposed to be here (my own story, about not belonging)—because I must, because it is the only empty spot for me. I have to share the violence that was invisible before I got here. I will explain it again but differently (that is not true). It will not be the last time. I can change the story (maybe that is also not true): I will repeat, interrupt, fall and die. This is a story about how I became a troublemaker or an angry bird.

*Quando a violência é invisível porque não estávamos aqui.*

Eons and eons ago, before the first boat could be seen on the glittering shore with the new world, parrots painted landscapes on the other side of the Atlantic. On one winter lockdown evening, there was also a story. One student from a well-known art institution was sitting in the kitchen of the house that I now live in: with a melodic, soft, caressing, sweet baritone, consistent voice, the student was narrating how fabulous and fantastic their experience had been so far at the School, because everyone was so polite and helpful. They found space to develop and go deep in their practice (exactly what they had been looking for) to upgrade their career and with the feedback from peers, tutors, and staff they were able to expand their involvement in the art field.

Breathless striving at a crossroads.

*Have you ever suffered violence there? Not at all. Quite the opposite.*

Violence does not exist if we are not there.

Carcará / Pega, mata e come / Carcará / Não vai morrer de fome / Carcará / Mais coragem do que homem / Carcará/ Pega, mata e come/  
- João Do Vale and José Cândido, “Carcará”



*Figure 4: Glitch.*

The Western cultural technique of documentation is what comes before this experience; the document is the technological apparatus that concerns the liberal nation-state and serves to maintain its structures. This writing tries to complexify the relations between my artistic practice and the invisible macro-structures of power like the document (proof of existence) with a shrill scream, a knot in the neck, deep anguish, and a sinking melancholy. Most cultural institutions reproduce inequalities of social, gender, race, and class, mainly as a way to maintain power; in this particular case: those created by the choreographic shifts from south to north, the colonial reproduction of captivity, of the archive, of categorization. With a cold analytic procedure—capturing in vitro, dead or alive—all urgent life forms are framed in neat terms such as internationalization, inclusion, and diversity.

Between profiles, Petri dishes, vogelhuisje, zoo catalogues, greenhouses, and apes.

Are we still here?

### **The Future of Art Research: IN VIVO**

I decided to escape from the in vitro, the glass, the studio, and the walls of the institution and went away embodying a bird, a captive-born who never learned how to fly and almost died in this new hostile environment. A bird who only complains about abuses of power or unequal conditions unveils the failure of the institution to deal with and to acknowledge that, by exposing and naming the bird as angry, unable to fly, hermetic, complex, exotic, unique, and violent.

The exposure of captive exotic ones happens in a micropolitical way with bacteria, birds, plants, and humans. This practice of putting 'exotic' beings on display began in Europe in the early modern period, when European explorers made their way to every corner of the globe. Sailors brought

people with them from the newly explored areas, much as they might present foreign objects, plants, and animals to prove the exoticism and wealth of previously unknown countries. Along with the presentation of individual human beings, major exhibitions were organized from the 16th century onward. I would like to tell another story, in which refusal is the knowledge embodied experience of a collective voice that flies; “ungovernable” as Fred Moten and Sadiya Hartman would say. A story of refusing.

Is it true that Art Research resembles animal parks and greenhouses, thriving in a state of captivity that is classified in zoo catalogues and profile shots? Within their exhibits, applicants, staff, and tutors, honoring their specific heritage and background, utilize the concept of representation. At the same time, the lack of plural voices to develop methodologies, pedagogies, and broader content references continue to perpetuate a narrow field of foreign landscapes. From one perspective, this educational system enacts forms of discipline, violence, punishment, and containment that do unquantifiable damage. On the other hand, it is possible to draw fugitive choreographies inside the institutional borders, to open portals in which we can imagine impossible planes, lines, dances, and layers of escaping together; a shared technology could be a common way of inhabiting this space as a refuge. An ontology of fugitivity operates at the intersection of Black studies and feminist science and technology studies as a performance of resistance to systems of knowledge.

This essay is an attempt to ask—in a frustrated and submerged, tear-sunken technology of wording and on behalf of the ones who never had the right to live or who do not belong, or those who have never been here, for those who died right after birth—what it could be if we dream and act together, towards indiscipline and disruption of macrostructures.

In the encounter, slowness, and softness stand in opposition to the ones described as fast, sharp and loud. In this encounter, the grammar of exclusion becomes visible: with these parameters, based on the hierarchy of a specific cosmology, the soft and slow are allowed to perform and legitimize violence towards the fast, quick and loud, and the multitude of bodies that are restless and out of tune. And thus, a regime of invisibility is created and perpetuated. The antelope, for example, in a state of dance, with its powerful musculature of the lower limbs, can remain sublime even at high speed. Always afraid, always beautiful, even when running in the herd, it stubbornly refuses stillness, because the urgency to stay alive is deep in its flesh.

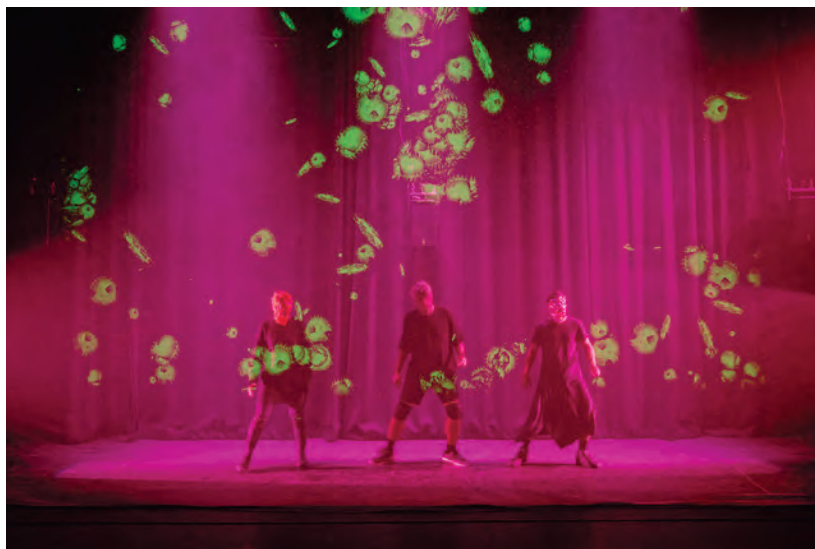
Ei, você aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí / Me dá um dinheiro aí / Ei, você aí / Me dá um  
dinheiro aí Me dá um dinheiro aí

- Glauco Silva Ferreira, Homero Silva Ferreira,  
and Ivan Silva Ferreira, “Me dá Um Dinheiro Aí”

Perhaps, it will be possible to elaborate here on how this neoliberal structure tried to kill the dance, assassinate the movement, destroy the impossible transatlantic displacements, and all its choreographic futurities. It has also changed into poverty: the plethora, potency, exuberance, resistance, heat, vitality, dexterity, sweat, tears, and pain, exoticizing the flesh into pornography. Perhaps not, due to the impossibility of relations within volcanic displacements, fissures,

breakages, explosions, rainforest, humidity, and contamination that have transformed RAGE into ACTION, creating a rupture, a bomb, dynamite.

For a bacteria from a highly contagious context from the south; trans-dislocated and relocated in this in vitro experiment called "reality," the available options would be immediate death or a shapeshifting survival mode transmuted in rhythm, speed, sharpness, precision in a radical choreography. The bacteria together can also change the environment. I was immersed in a petri dish, a test tube in this realm; and all my movements, thoughts, desires, and companion species disappeared, and vanished away. I forgot everything. I was under control and surveillance by the "real scientists" who were naming, describing, cataloging, commenting, wording, categorizing, understanding, reading, listening, analyzing, and criticizing.



*Figure 5: 7 Solos for 11 Bacterias Falling Through*

I can not remember.  
I am a captive-born bird,  
melancholic at ease  
with the perpetual dream of freedom  
I am colonized  
I can barely see through the bars of rage  
with my clipped wings  
I can barely take shallow flights  
from this in vitro condition  
trapped  
with tears choking in my throat  
I envy those free-flying, flocking around  
who have never been catalogued  
I forgot how to sing and never learned how to fly

I was born in captivity in a foreign country and quartered.  
from a grave of dreams  
I am constantly shouting a nightmare scream  
always angry because I can't feel the breeze.  
Even though I am a bird, I cannot fly. I decided to use the same technology: Let's write, listen and read. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," said Audre Lorde. And if we sleep and dream together? Aren't we all dead by now? Are they anesthetized? Can they feel anything? Can we feel anything?  
Freeze, stillness, to whom does slowness belong?  
I cannot remember.  
I will tell you another story about birds...

Magpies are normally sedentary and spend winters close to their nesting territories, but birds living near the northern limit of their range in Sweden, Finland, and Russia can move south in harsh weather. Magpies have been observed engaging in elaborate social rituals, possibly including the expression of grief. Mirror self-recognition has been demonstrated in European magpies making them one of only a few species to possess this capability. Their intelligence is equivalent to that of the great apes (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) in terms of social cognition, causal reasoning, flexibility, imagination, and prospection. They are everywhere here in the Netherlands. One day I was flying low and found an open wound, a smashed "Maggie" run over with the guts in the open air. I remembered the colors, the fruits, the samba, Ze Carioca, Carmen Miranda, Rio, and the Brazilian Carnival.

Entre Papangus, Caretas e La Ursa.

Ei pessoal / Ei moçada / Carnaval começa no galo da madrugada. / Ei pessoal / Ei moçada / Carnaval começa no galo da madrugada.

- "Hino do Galo da Madrugada"

"A document is a proof in support of a fact" (Briet 1951, 9).

I want to highlight the resemblance of colonial technologies disguised as scientific experiments in the archiving of species, human apes, objects, and artifacts. I declare war against this process through voicing a micro perspective as follows:

What happens when you isolate bacteria from their usual biological surroundings is that, while it may not fully or accurately predict the effects on a whole organism, it permits a more convenient analysis for the scientists. Laboratory experiments also have verified that when some bacteria are exposed to a high amount of antibiotics they become super-bacteria. Anaesthetic attempts to make them attune, slow down, and adapt do not put them to sleep but make them really, really angry. In this sense, the savage mind contributed to this technology, by framing intellectually and through a sophisticated methodology, a particular understanding of the world, a way of analyzing, distinguishing, and classifying; a logic based on dialectics and reasoning which does not always serve "global south" cosmovisions.

My practice, called *Attempts to survive in apnea*, deals with a series of scores that address several air constrictions in high-risk unhealthy areas (not safe at all). Apnea is a blocking of airflow within an individual, and the resulting effects (lack of oxygenation, higher blood pressure, and an overall sense of suffocation) highlight a somatic-political notion of “apnea” to a general condition of existence for racialized individuals in a colonized situation. What is it to breathe in a world suffocating by toxic hegemonies and ecological and sanitary catastrophes? Did you know that the mitochondria breathing oxygen are vestiges of the first mutated bacterias living in symbiosis? Due to the photosynthetic efforts of bacteria, the planet has an atmosphere with oxygen, allowing a poisonous gas to be translated into enjoyable breezes, holding up macaws, parrots, and magpies. The question is how to imagine a possible choreography from this apnea: How to take a deep breath and feel the breeze?

What we learn from this institutional symbiotic relation is that if a text can give words to something—a difficulty, violence, an injustice, a dynamic—or if it can name something that had yet to be named in quite the same way, then people will find it, even if they do not find a lead in the language; they will grab hold of it; they will persist with it.

Ouvi dizer que o mundo vai-se acabar/ Que tudo vai pra cucuia/ O sol não mais  
brilhará /

Mas se deixarem/ Um bombo e uma mulata/ E um trombone de prata O frevo bom  
viverá

Pode acabar o petróleo Pode acabar a vergonha

Pode acabar tudo enfim Mas deixem o frevo pra mim.

- Capiba, “Trombone de Prata”

Going back to the School: The peer-to-peer learning possibility of the institution could be read as a contamination of microorganisms. One becomes millions, and plural existences become visible through the modification of one and the other. But knowledge as something that is constructed and transformed collectively can only be held in a peer-to-peer learning environment if the surroundings do not sabotage the generosity and resilience by a process of atomization and isolation. The mechanisms of the institution must be transparent: the access to resources needs to contribute to the community, not to engrain prejudices but to encourage reflection and common decision making to diminish the inequalities of class, gender, and race. A common vocabulary is needed to address these issues from an anti-racist, anti-colonial position, to acknowledge privileges and aesthetic decisions based on hegemonic statements within the art field.

Becoming a flock of birds should not be an impossible achievement. The institutionalized exchange between peers should aim for a riot or a celebration avoiding any feedback that could be behaviorist and descriptive; commenting and criticizing practices as if a so-called “neutral vocabulary” could exist tends towards exoticization and categorization. Atomization—or anti-flocking—is a technology specifically designed to target those who can only survive in flocks and swarms. When the birds spread the seeds of forest trees among us... As Nelly Wat describes, Sara Ahmed—in her lecture “Complaint as Queer Method”— continues to return to the metaphor of a post box “occupied by birds nesting, which she uses to visualize what a complaint can feel like; the

post box, though it was not created for the birds that nest within, becomes a safe shelter. Yet the nest can also be disturbed by the letters within” (Wat 2019, n.p.). Quoting Ahmed: “We know so much from trying to transform the worlds that don’t accommodate us. But that fight can also just be so damn hard. When we have to fight for existence, we can end up feeling that fighting is our existence. And so, we need each other. We need to become each other’s resources” (Ahmed in Wat 2019, n.p.).

*South Boom Boom* is an attempt to survive in apnea, a continuous work, a possibility to reimagine the world, a way to escape captivity, draw fugitive lines, resist, take flight, conceive resistances, migrate, reinvent a catastrophe, deform the shapes of oppression across time.



Figure 6: 7 Solos for Bacteria Falling Through

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## Biography

Flavia Pinheiro is a choreographer and performer from Recife, Brazil currently based in Amsterdam. Her research foregrounds networks of resilience and resistance to systems of knowledge by fabulative speculations around Science and Technologies. Her artistic practice in an ongoing attempt to create breathing and vital conditions; in an unstoppable dance she creates improbable exchanges with the nonhumans such as bacterias, plants, birds, antelopes and ghosts. She focuses in states of survival and a refusal of captivity by proposing a radical ontological turn. She navigates in different medias (photography, video, performance, installation, sound, writing) to underline how diversity and transversality can contribute to (un)learning colonial pedagogies.

<https://flavia-pinheiro-site.webflow.io/>

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PERFORMANCE  
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## SUB-ATLANTIC ABYSS

ISIS ANDREATA DAS GRADUATE SCHOOL

“a cada travessia  
mais subaquática me torno  
as orelhas conchas  
as costelas guelras.

estamos virando peixes  
e somos muitos.”

Esta escrita é um devaneio sobre habitar o abismo da vida sub-atlântica. Um esboço de uma narrativa especulativa sobre como subverter margens físicas e metafísicas. Mergulhando. Um ato confiante na estratégia de que delirar entre as bordas é uma forma de existir para além dos estigmas da Terra Firme.

Trata-se de mais uma estória sem fim. Sem herói. Sem conflito. Um fragmento, uma semente, um grão de areia. Tal como milhares de estórias cotidianamente inventadas por debaixo dos destroços e da violência das águas que afogam vidas quando estas tentam corajosamente boiar ou nadar para além das superfícies e das fronteiras que lhes foram impostas.

Aos que estão seguros em suas embarcações ou obstinados por chegar enfim à terra continental, nada parece estar acontecendo. São incapazes de escutar o falatório subaquático. Insistem em usar armas de pesca e tecnologias de controle das marés. Possuem inúmeras ferramentas de expropriação das águas, mas mal sabem nadar.

Já para os que não têm a opção de boiar, o melhor a fazer é puxar uma boa dose de ar e—com os pulmões cheios— mergulhar no abismo das águas oceânicas.

Aos seres apartados da margem, portanto, o abismo é experiência comum. Seja pelos diagnósticos psiquiátricos, seja por definições normativas de gênero, por subjugação de raça, por qualificações capacitistas e/ou por condições sócio-geo-econômicas de classe apropriar-se das habilidades da vida subaquática é um gesto não só de resistência, mas de retomada do sentido comum de delirar a vida para além do paradigma da Terra Firme.

Em subversão à racionalidade compulsória e aos deslocamentos forçados de vidas de uma superfície plana a outra, o abismo oceânico é, então, habitat para uma infinidade de seres dissidentes da norma. Dessa multidão, corpos estigmatizados tanto pela desrazão como pela outridade inventada e praticada por aqueles que pairam seguros sob a superfície (ou assentam seus pés sob a firmeza da terra) encontram na vida sub-atlântica um lugar possível para existir e estabelecer elos de aliança.

Entre as experiências das loucuras, por exemplo, o oceano se revela como um lugar por onde uma super-vida emerge. Uma transcendência ficcional que brota para além das narrativas lineares, vitoriosas, nítidas e evidentes que constituem a imaginação colonial e sua perspectiva violenta de vida social.

No interior dos oceanos, a verticalidade do corpo ereto se desfigura. Se horizontaliza. Comunidades inteiras submersas cantam os cantos das baleias. Linguagem aquosa, que se espalha em ondas lentas e toca a pele de todos que nos entre-mares habitam.

Embaixo das águas, é possível perder verdadeiramente a sensação de peso. A realidade concreta do corpo se torna ilusão enquanto os ouvidos se tapam a cada centímetro em direção ao fundo.

### **Respiro 1: Para viver no abismo sub-atlântico há vozes que não se deve ouvir.**

Com tempo, prática e sabedoria a pressão diminui. O universalismo de um único idioma é pouco provável que vingue, pois as águas mudam a todo tempo de temperatura e o ambiente nunca permanece estável por muito tempo. Uma vez submerso, o silêncio ensurdecedor inicial aos poucos abre espaço dentro das têmeoras, que por sua vez se tornam conchas acústicas capazes de escutar sons de outros tempos.

No abismo sub-atlântico é possível também abrir os olhos e deixar arder as córneas oculares até que seja possível enxergar um borrão nebuloso. Uma paisagem embaçada. Nessa paisagem indefinida habitam outras criaturas marítimas. Todas sem forma legível. Seres de tamanhos e cores diversas. São milhares de tipos de vidas que foram lançadas ou lançaram-se voluntariamente no abismo cuja criação é estratégia daqueles que se consideram seguros o suficiente para dividir um lado do outro. Que separam, nomeiam, distinguem, comparam, definem, qualificam o que é terra firme, o que é margem e o que é oceano.

Portanto, aos habitantes sub-atlânticos cabe desde o fundo preservar os mistérios da vida-sem-borda a fim de gozar outro tipo de força gravitacional que constitui o mergulho da experiência de dissidência. A magia é, portanto, saber que o abismo é, em si, pura inseparabilidade. E que é nele por onde se diluem por completo as divisórias que foram impregnadas aos seres subaquáticos, vindos de oceanos vários, que compartilham—sempre com muita coragem, luta e sequela— a experiência de atravessar fronteiras e perceber que não há mais nem destino nem partida. Que há apenas as águas e a linha hemisférica em si.

**Respiro 2: Viver o abismo é quando a tenacidade da linha acaba por se tornar a própria morada.**

Para quem vive submerso, a superfície é apenas passagem. Ou tampouco existe. Seja para dar saltos ou conferir o brilho da luz do sol, já se sabe que tentar nadar na superfície é muito mais exaustivo do que a apnéia do mergulho. Apesar da superfície parecer plana, sua solidez é irreal.

**Respiro 3: Quem vive submerso no abismo sabe que não se pisa em águas profundas sem se afundar.**

Uma vez embaixo, o deslocamento é condição de existência. Não existe a possibilidade de parar. Mesmo em pausa, a força das marés não cessa de mover os corpos. A natureza dinâmica dos redemoinhos é, justamente, o meio pelo qual se encontra o alimento. Os oceanos parecem ser sempre os mesmos, mas as suas águas profundas não cessam de se mover e se transformar.

Saber o percurso não é o que mais importa. Não há uma direção precisa a seguir. Dentro do interior das fronteiras não há sentido retilíneo. O tempo é definitivamente multidirecional, denso e irregular. O percurso de ir é, na realidade, a constante prática de fabular guelras para si, já que no abismo o oxigênio é absorvido por órgãos inventados e adaptados para viver na escassez e vulnerabilidade sistêmica.

**Respiro 4: Respirar embaixo das águas é uma das tecnologias adquiridas pelas ancestralidades subaquáticas.**

Abaixo e além do paradigma continental—onde para muitos não é possível nadar—as palavras escapam em desordem e se misturam com as vozes de outros seres. Em cacofonia formam linguagens e anatomias ininteligíveis, porém capazes de narrar e especular com exatidão a experiência encarnada de não estar nem lá nem cá. Linguagens que são como fragmentos do enorme e complexo exoesqueleto de corais multicoloridos por onde habitam, camuflam e deliram as vidas subaquáticas.

**Respiro 5: Delirar é gesto de recusa deliberada da borda colonial.**

Portanto, compartilhar o delírio que constitui a paisagem do fundo do mar faz dos seres sub-atlânticos habilidosos o suficiente para, sempre que for preciso, produzir com os seus movimentos e vozes ondas gigantes que atravessam quilômetros e, cujo efeito é—mesmo que passageiro—provar aos habitantes da Terra Firme o quão frágil, instável e imperfeita é a borda.

**Respiro último: O movimento dos seres vivos no abismo sub-atlântico é também chamado de maremoto decolonial.**



Esta foi uma prática. Um experimento em processo. Um exercício de depor a partir de um corpo nu que se move sem fim. Que aprende a nadar a cada mergulho. Que tem interesse em especular a travessia da borda ao mar. Do mar à borda. Trata-se de um desdobramento de uma coreografia pessoal chamada “Verde Abismo” (<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/458783221> [senha: Abismo]), em desenvolvimento na DAS Choreography em Amsterdam. Mais um elemento a ser colocado na bolsa verde, cujo interior contém outros pequenos objetos que estão sendo encontrados em travessia.

## SUB-ATLANTIC ABYSS

“with each crossing  
the more subaquatic I become  
my ears, seashells  
the ribs, gills.

we’re becoming fish  
and we are many.”

This writing is a reverie about inhabiting the abyss of sub-atlantic life. An outline of a storytelling about subverting physical and metaphysical margins. Diving. A confident act of raving deliriously along the edges is a way of existing beyond the stigmas of Terra Firme.

This is another never-ending story. No hero. No conflict. A fragment, a seed, a grain of sand. Just like thousands of stories invented every day under the debris and violence of the waters that drown lives when they bravely try to float or swim beyond the surfaces and borders imposed on them.

To those who are safe in their boats or bent upon reaching the mainland at last, nothing seems to be happening. They are helpless to hear the underwater chatter. They insist on using fishing traps and tide control technologies. They possess innumerable tools for expropriating the waters, but they can barely swim.

For those who do not have the option to float, the best thing to do is to pull in a good dose of air and—with full lungs—dive into the abyss of ocean waters.

For those creatures cut off from the margin, the abyss is a common experience. Whether through psychiatric diagnoses, normative definitions of gender, subjugation of race, ableism and/or class-socio-geo-economic conditions, appropriating the skills of underwater life is a gesture not only of resistance, but of resuming the common sense of dreaming life beyond the paradigm of Terra Firme.

Subverting compulsory rationality and the forced displacements of lives from one flat surface to another, the oceanic abyss is then a habitat to an infinity of beings dissenting from the norm. From this multitude, bodies stigmatised both by unreason and by the otherness invented and practised by those who hover securely beneath the surface (or place their feet under the firmness of the earth), find in sub-atlantic life a possible place to exist and establish alliances.

In relation to experiences of madness, for example, the ocean reveals itself as a place through which a super-life emerges: a fictional transcendence that sprouts beyond the linear, victorious, sharp and evident narratives that constitute the colonial imagination and its violent perspective on social life.

Inside the oceans, the verticality of the upright body disappears. It becomes horizontal. Whole submerged communities sing the songs of whales. A watery language that spreads in slow waves and touches the skin of all those who live between the seas.

Underwater, it is possible to truly lose the feeling of weight. The concrete reality of the body becomes an illusion as the ears cover every inch towards the bottom.

***Breath 1: To live in the sub-atlantic abyss, there are voices you should not listen to.***

Over time, practice and wisdom, the pressure eases. The universalism of a single language is unlikely to succeed, because the water changes temperature all the time and the environment is never stable for long. Once submerged, the initial deafening silence gradually makes room inside the temples, which in turn become acoustic shells capable of listening to sounds from other times.

In the sub-atlantic abyss, it is also possible to open your eyes and let the corneas burn until you can see a hazy blur. A foggy landscape. In this undefined landscape live other sea creatures. All of them without a legible form. Beings of various sizes and colours. They are thousands of types of lives that were thrown or voluntarily threw themselves into the abyss, whose creation is a strategy of those who consider themselves safe enough to divide one side from the other; to separate, name, distinguish, compare, define, qualify what is solid ground, what is shore and what is ocean.

Thus, it is up to the sub-atlantic inhabitants to preserve the mysteries of life-without-ground from below in order to enjoy another kind of gravitational force that constitutes the plunge of the experience of dissidence. Magic, therefore, is knowing that the abyss is in itself pure inseparability. It is knowing that the abyss is where the dividing lines that impregnate underwater beings are completely diluted; these beings who, coming from several oceans, courageously share the experience of crossing borders and the realisation that there is no more destination than there is departure. There are only the waters and the hemispheric line itself.

***Breath 2: Living the abyss is when the tenacity of the line eventually becomes the very address.***

For those who live underwater, the surface is just a passage—or, it doesn't exist at all. Whether it is to breach or to check out the glint of the sunlight, we already know that trying to swim on the surface is much more exhausting than holding your breath to dive. Although the surface appears flat, its consistency is unreal.

***Breath 3: Those who live submerged in the abyss know that you cannot enter into deep water without sinking.***

Once below, displacement is a condition of existence. There is no possibility of stopping. Even in pausing, the force of the tides does not stop moving bodies. The dynamic nature of the eddies is

precisely the means by which food is found. The oceans seem to be always the same, but their deep waters never cease to move and transform.

Knowing the route is not what matters most. There is no precise direction to follow. In the ocean, there is no linear direction. Time is definitely multidirectional, dense and irregular. The outward journey is, in reality, the constant practice of creating gills for oneself since, in the abyss, oxygen is absorbed by organs invented and adapted to live in systemic scarcity and vulnerability.

***Breath 4: Breathing underwater is one of the technologies acquired from subaquatic ancestries.***

Below and beyond the continental paradigm—where for many it is not possible to swim—words escape in disorder and mingle with the voices of other beings. In cacophony, they form unintelligible languages and anatomies, but those that are capable of narrating and speculating with accuracy the embodied experience of being neither here nor there. Languages which are like fragments of the enormous and complex exoskeleton of multicoloured corals where underwater lives live, camouflage and rave.

***Breath 5: Delirium is a gesture of deliberate refusal of the colonial edge.***

Sharing the delirium that constitutes the seabed landscape makes sub-atlantic beings skilled enough to produce giant waves with their movements and voices whenever necessary: tidal waves that cross kilometres and whose effect—even if fleeting—is to prove to the inhabitants of Terra Firme how fragile, unstable and imperfect the edge is.

***Last breath: the movement of living beings in the sub-atlantic abyss is also called a decolonial tidal wave.***



This was a practice, an experiment in process. An exercise in testifying from a naked body that moves endlessly; that learns to swim with every dive; that is interested in speculating the crossing from the edge to the sea. From the sea to the edge. This is an unfolding of a personal choreography research called “Verde Abismo”— <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/458783221> [password: Abismo]—in development at DAS Choreography. One more element to be placed in the green bag, whose interior contains other small objects that are being found in the crossing.

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### Biography

Isis Andreatta (1988) is a Brazilian dance maker [São Paulo/BR] and works as performer, choreographer, therapist and educator. Her artistic practice has been focused on the emergence of movement and writing with an interest in investigating non-hierarchical relationships between perception, imagination and physicality. She's been interested in contexts involving interdisciplinarity among knowledge situated in the frontiers between art, therapy, philosophy and politics such as: contemporary clinical mental health, principles of somatic education, decolonial philosophies and cultural studies. She is co-director and member of Grupo VÃO since 2009 and since 2017 she's co-coordinator of the Open Theater and Clinic Group, a context of artistic and clinical approaches with people undergoing psychiatric treatment.

Currently based in Amsterdam she's doing a master DAS Choreography [2021-2023] at DAS Graduate School (through the Holland Scholarship)

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## OS PÁSSAROS [THE BIRDS]

CAROLINA BIANCHI DAS GRADUATE SCHOOL, AMSTERDAM

'Aparecei, aparecei, qualquer que seja vossa forma  
ou nome, Ó Touro da Montanha, Serpente das Cem Cabeças,  
Leão da Chama Abrasadora! Ó Deus, Fera, Mistério, Vinde!  
Toca com tuas várias mãos, tuas dezenas de línguas - o mundo'

- Euripides, *Bacchae*

### 1.

Jérôme Bel has decided, for ecological reasons, not to work in any way that involves a plane ride (Sulcas 2019).

Vou começar puxando um assunto mezzo antigo: Há dois anos muito se falou no restritíssimo 'mundo das artes performativas'—risos—sobre declarações do internacionalmente reconhecido e bem sucedido coreógrafo francês Jérôme Bel propondo uma reflexão para que artistas parassem de viajar de avião, em decorrência dos níveis de emissão de carbono. Jérôme não mais se deslocaria dessa maneira, e portanto fazia um convite aos colegas da classe artística a também optarem por outras formas de deslocamento no que concerne turnês, viagens a festivais, residências artísticas e etc.

É nítido que se você não nasceu em um país do norte hegemônico, essa decisão de Jérôme Bel aponta para diferenças cruciais de recursos e privilégios, assim como me faz pensar imediatamente: O que torna tão importante a experiência viva de coletivos teatrais de outros países se deslocando para determinados contextos? E no quanto as experiências virtuais ainda não estão em páreos para a substituição da presença, aliás, nada substitui nada nesse sentido, porque simplesmente são experiências que não podem estar em comparação, por possuírem naturezas distintas.

O avião tende a ser o modo de viagem mais utilizado para grupos de países que não se encontram dentro da Europa, por exemplo.

Coletivos de teatro dos países do Sul do mundo têm que circular. Por inúmeras razões, entre elas: Nada substitui a presença, a troca entre público e artista na sala de um teatro. Alargar o imaginário com outras idéias, outras confabulações que não as do seu próprio território. E também, para que artistas de lugares com uma situação cultural mais difícil consigam se capitalizar, uma vez que o Euro e o Dólar estão sempre em vantagem sobre outras moedas, como o Real por exemplo, moeda brasileira.

Bel acknowledged that his decision was radical, and that his choice was not available to all. 'Everyone intelligent and sensitive to this cause must invent their own solutions,' he said. 'But our work in contemporary art is to change things.' (Huge swirl of arms.) 'We must change this.' (Sulcas 2019)

Mas até aqui não há muitas novidades. E esse não é um artigo sobre Jérôme Bel e sua preocupação ecológica.

Essa é uma pequena reflexão sobre práticas de trabalho, e para falar de práticas só é possível pensar em coletivização de paixões. E se falo de paixões, falo sobre a minha raiva. Se durante muito tempo a palavra que originava muita coisa no meu trabalho era erotismo ou libido eu diria que agora é a raiva. Escrevo com muita raiva, castigando as teclas do meu computador emprestado, como se os dedos fossem martelos de ferro.

No olho da pandemia em 2020, entrei na Universidade de Amsterdã para um programa de mestrado, o que significava estar fisicamente distante do grupo de artistas que vinha trabalhando diariamente nos últimos anos.

## 2.

Como se mover?

Desde 2016 venho trabalhando em parceria com um coletivo de artistas no Brasil que batizamos Cara de Cavallo. Esse coletivo, movimenta uma gira de pessoas através de espetáculos, oficinas e residências.

Trabalho como artista independente e não sou herdeira, o que significa que raramente conto com dinheiro de instituições ou suporte financeiro para minhas criações. Nos últimos anos meus trabalhos foram realizados através de crowdfunding ou ainda de empréstimos, sempre trabalhando no limite dos recursos e também das forças. Todos os dinheiros de vendas dos trabalhos foram igualmente divididos entre o enorme coletivo de pessoas.

Muitos amigos artistas zombavam da minha completa inabilidade para pensar em trabalhos que poderiam me dar mais grana e visibilidade, uma vez que sou a pessoa responsável pela direção, dramaturgia e também atuo nos espetáculos.

Por que então criar peças que vão fazer uma jornada impossível?

Apesar do meu nome vir à frente do nome do grupo—e sim, isso ainda existe em consideração ao número de mulheres da América Latina dirigindo peças de teatro e à enorme desigualdade de oportunidades no famigerado mercado das artes do mundo, eu passo longe do desejo de protagonizar todas as dimensões da história dos nossos 'corres.' Não sei e não desejo estar sozinha fazendo teatro.

Mas percebo cada vez menos incentivo tanto de instituições como de programadores e também de artistas para seguir trabalhando em grupos grandes e, sobretudo, com um grupo que neste momento está em outro continente.

'Por que você não pode fazer suas práticas com performers europeus enquanto está aqui? Por que não convidar artistas europeus para atuarem nesses trabalhos?'

Porque não.

E isso jamais desmerece qualquer qualidade dos performers que nasceram, trabalham e vivem aqui. Suas habilidades já foram muito desejadas por mim, assim como suas oportunidades.

O trabalho de um coletivo é constante prática, elucubração no talo, no meu caso posso afirmar que não existe pesquisa sem esse compartilhamento mútuo de paixões. Por mais que eu apresente o começo de algumas elocubrações, a hierarquia da direção não é necessariamente autoritária. Uma coordenação pode ser transversal, cheia de camadas de colaboração. Não existe prática sem coletivizar. Nesse processo do mestrado em meio a pandemia fiz o que pude: Horas de zoom, palestra, performance, compartilhamentos telepáticos - afoguei na solidão, dei oficina, convidei algumas performers próximas para chegarem junto. E ainda, todo o tempo, tramei sem misericórdia ou descanso - como traria meu coletivo presencialmente para essa experiência da criação da peça como parte de um processo de mestrado, em um meio acadêmico.

É possível que eu seja uma grande idiota.

É possível que cada trabalho seja sempre um looping de um último golpe de fé.

Sem o incentivo para o deslocamento de grupos, ocorre o apagamento da memória. O apagamento de uma determinada linguagem, um vocabulário que o tempo e condições de trabalho vão construindo. E não estou negando minha habilidade de compartilhar esse vocabulário com outras pessoas que não pertencem a esse coletivo. Tenho feito isso por muitos anos. Mas há um rigor na construção, no desejo comum de criar linguagem, que é a vitalidade, o sangue circulando nos meus trabalhos. E isso é labuta, é tempo, é corre.

Não posso ficar muito tempo sem trabalhar em grupo. Não tenho talento para ser a messias trazendo 'a palavra', sozinha carregando um saco de ossos. E a cada vez que se precisa levantar um trabalho, ter que ressuscitar a si mesma, e depois o próprio trabalho.

No meu mais recente trabalho, ainda em processo, Cadela Força, peça em cinco capítulos em que me aproximo de alguns casos de feminicídio, resolvi testar alguns desses limites da minha presença. No primeiro capítulo tomo um Boa Noite Cinderela<sup>1</sup> que me coloca para dormir, de forma que o coletivo assume a cena até o último capítulo.

O que configura uma tentativa de escapar da armadilha do artista neoliberal? Me parece que o corpo do artista neoliberal é o corpo que almeja se tornar protagonista da arte, com tesão capturado pelo mercado faminto pelos 'grandes artistas, os melhores.' O corpo da competição, do mapa dos contatos auspiciosos guardados a sete chaves para que você troque apenas com os seus e exclua qualquer concorrência.

A lógica do desmembramento dos pares, teme a potência da memória.

### 3.

Uma amiga artista brasileira que também está fazendo mestrado fora do Brasil, em uma das etapas de sua pesquisa, convidou um grupo de alunos do Bacharelado para participarem de uma apresentação. Durante meses essa artista compartilhou suas práticas, propôs exercícios, colocou sua memória na mesa, abriu espaço para que acessassem outras lógicas de colaboração, e então chegaram a um esqueleto do trabalho.

Depois da apresentação, os alunos foram totalmente desencorajados a seguir no projeto de pesquisa, pela própria direção da sua escola. Uma vez que o trabalho exigia muita intensidade física e eles não deveriam perder seu 'tempo' para fazer esse trabalho. Porque afinal são 'makers' e portanto devem estar a serviço de si próprios.

### 4.

Acordo e vejo a notícia de centenas de pássaros que morrem ao mesmo tempo ao passarem por alguma chaminé que os intoxica com sua fumaça, no México. Todos caem, ao mesmo tempo, quase como mágica, no chão.

Cobrimo as ruas com a maior fraternidade, a incondicional, até o tombo.

–Amsterdã, fevereiro de 2022

*Para Flávia, a grande força, e sempre em movimento.*

*Para Joana, Marina, Larissa, Rafael (com quem troquei idéia para tecer algumas teias deste artigo), Miguel, João, Luisa, Chico, Tomás, Luiza, José, Daniel e Carla - que vão pegar um avião.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Spark drink

# THE BIRDS

'Come forth, come forth, whatever your form  
or name, Oh Bull of the Mountain, Serpent of a Hundred Heads,  
Lion of the Blazing Flame! Oh God, Beast, Mystery, Come!  
Touch with thy many hands, thy tens of tongues - the world.'

- Euripides, *The Bacchae*

## 1.

Jérôme Bel has decided, for ecological reasons, not to work in any way that involves a plane ride (Sulcas 2019).

Let me start by bringing up an old subject: two years ago, a lot was said in the very restricted 'performing arts world' (laughs) about declarations made by the internationally recognised and successful French choreographer Jérôme Bel proposing that artists stop travelling by plane, due to carbon emission levels. Bel would no longer travel this way, and therefore invited his fellow artist to also opt for other forms of transportation, when travelling for tours, festivals, artistic residencies, etc.

To those who were not born in a hegemonic northern country, it seems clear that Bel's decision points to crucial differences in resources and privileges. Air travel tends to be the most commonly used mode of travel for groups from outside Europe, for example.

It immediately makes me think: What makes the lived experience of theatre collectives from other countries so important when moving to certain contexts? And, as for virtual experiences, they still cannot replace presence—indeed, nothing can replace anything in that sense. They are experiences that simply cannot be compared, as they are of different natures.

Theatre collectives from the Global South have to circulate. For countless reasons, among them: because nothing replaces the live exchange between audience and artists in a theatre space. But also, it is in order to widen the imaginary with other ideas, other confabulations than those of your own territory. At the same time, this circulation must continue so that artists from places with a more difficult cultural situation can capitalise, since the Euro and the Dollar are always at an advantage over other currencies, like the Brazilian Real.

Bel acknowledged that his decision was radical, and that his choice was not available to all. 'Everyone intelligent and sensitive to this cause must invent their own solutions,' he said. 'But our work in contemporary art is to change things.' (Huge swirl of arms.) 'We must change this.' (Sulcas 2019)

But, so far there is nothing new. And this is not an article about Jérôme Bel and his ecological concern.

This is a small reflection on working practices; and to talk about practices it is inevitable that we take into consideration the collectivisation of passions. And if I talk about passions, I talk about my anger. If, for a very long time, the word behind a lot of things in my work was eroticism or libido, I would say that now it is anger. I write with a lot of anger, punishing the keys of my borrowed computer, as if my fingers were iron hammers.

In the eye of the pandemic in 2020, since I joined the University of Amsterdam to start a Master's degree, what does it mean to be at a physical distance from those I've been working with every day for the last years?

## 2.

How to move?

Since 2016, I have been working in partnership with a collective of artists in Brazil baptised Cara de Cavalo. In this collective moves a circle of people coming together through performances, workshops and residencies.

I am an independent artist, and not an heiress, which means I rarely count on money from institutions or financial support for my creations. In the last years, my works were made through crowdfunding or even loans; I was always working at the limit of resources and also of strength. All the money earned from my own work was equally divided among the huge collective of people involved.

Many friends used to mock my complete inability to think of jobs that could give me more money and visibility, since I am the person responsible for directing and dramaturgy, as well as acting in the shows.

Why then create pieces that will surely take an impossible journey?

Despite my name coming in front of the group's name—and yes, that still stands on account of the number of Latin American women directing and the huge inequality of opportunity in the world's infamous arts market—I am far from wishing to lead all dimensions of the history of our 'corres.'<sup>1</sup> I don't know how and don't want to be alone in making theatre.

But I notice less and less incentive coming from institutions, art programmers and artists to keep working in large groups, especially with a group that is currently living in another continent.

'Why can't you perform with European artists while you are here? Why not invite European artists to be in these works?'

Why not.

And that never diminishes any quality of the performers who were born, work and live here. Their skills were once much desired by me, as were their opportunities.

The work of a collective is a constant production of practice and strong confabulation; in my case, I can affirm that there is no research without this mutual sharing of passions. As much as I present the beginning of some thoughts, the hierarchy of the direction is not necessarily authoritarian. Coordination can be transversal, full of layers of intervention. There is no practice without collectivising. During the Masters, in the middle of the pandemic, I did what I could, zoom hours, lectures, performances, telepathic sharing; I drowned in solitude, gave workshops and invited some nearby performers to come together. And yet, all the time, I plotted, without mercy or rest, how I would bring my collective in person for this experience of creating the piece as part of a Masters process in an academic environment.

It is possible that I am a great fool.

But it is always possible that each work will be a looping of my last leap of faith.

Memory is erased when there is no incentive to travel as a group. A certain language is extinguished, a vocabulary that time and working conditions build. I do not deny my ability to share this vocabulary with other people who do not belong to this collective; I have been doing this for many years. But there is a rigor in the construction and in the common desire to create a language, which is the vitality, the blood circulating in my work. And that is toil and time; it is 'corre.' I cannot go a long time without working in a group. I have no talent for being the messiah bringing 'the word,' alone carrying a bag of bones. And every time you have to do a job, you have to resurrect yourself, and then the job itself.

My most recent work, still in process, is *Cadela Força*, a play in five chapters in which I approach some cases of femicide. In this piece, I decided to test some of these limits of presence. In the first chapter, I take a *Good Night Cinderella*<sup>2</sup> that puts me to sleep, so that the collective stays in the scene until the last chapter.

What would be an attempt to escape the trap of the neoliberal artist? It seems to me that the body of the neoliberal artist is the body that aspires to become the protagonist of art, with a hard-on captured by the hungry market looking for the 'great artists, the best.' Everything is trapped in the body of competition, the map of auspicious contacts kept under lock and key, so that you exchange only with your own. The logic of dismembering peers, fears the power of memory.

### 3.

In one of the stages of her research, a Brazilian artist friend who is also doing her Masters abroad, invited a group of Bachelors students to participate in a presentation. For months, this artist shared her practices, proposed exercises, put her memory on the table, opened a space for them to access other logics of collaboration, and then they arrived at a skeleton of the work.

After the presentation, the students were totally discouraged to pursue the research project by their own school management. Since the process of making the work required a lot of physical intensity, they should not waste their 'time' on it. Because, after all, they are 'makers' and therefore should be at the service of themselves.

#### 4.

I wake up and see the news about hundreds of birds in Mexico that died at the same time when they passed through a chimney that intoxicated them with its smoke. They all fall at the same time, almost like magic, to the ground.

Covering the streets with the greatest fraternity, unconditional, until the fall.

–Amsterdam, February 2022

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Corre: Expression used in Brazil that refers to toil, work. For example group rehearses in a place borrowed from another collective, and we need to remove the set because the time agreed upon has already expired the time that was agreed upon, and you call your friend who has a truck and we ask in WhatsApp - Who is free to help in this corre?

<sup>2</sup> 'Good Night Cinderella' is a name for a drug cocktail of GHB-ketamine-flunitrazepam used to spike drinks.

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#### Biography

Carolina Bianchi is a theatre director, dramaturg and performer. Her research inhabits spaces between theatre, performance, dance dealing with problems related to patriarchy, phantasmagoria, historical pacts, gender as crisis, colonial heritages, and eroticism as part of a performative investigation. She is currently based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She is in the second year of the Master programme at DAS Theatre at the Amsterdam University of the Arts (through the Orange Tulip Scholarship).

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