PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

EDITORIAL, *PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY* VOL. 10 NO. 1

DIANA DAMIAN MARTIN ROYAL CENTRAL SCHOOL OF SPEECH AND DRAMA
EVE KATSOURAKI UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF SCOTLAND
THERON SCHMIDT UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

Welcome to the first of a two-part open volume of Performance Philosophy.

Three years ago, when drafting our editorial for this open issue, we spoke about the energies and paradoxes of 'open', as they resonate with performance philosophy as a still emerging, interdisciplinary field of creative and critical practice. Over these three years—as the world continues to unfold, collapse, regather, witness—we remain committed to holding the tethers between performance and philosophy *open*. Performance Philosophy's own fluidity, its movements across, make it a welcoming space for performing thinking and thinking as performance, in the thickness of the many nows that shape our experiences. What does it mean to open a field? How does one practice openness in the midst of conflict, genocide, precarity, but also resistance, imagination, hope? When power itself is unstable, what interstices make themselves felt and seen? How does an open issue perform the multiple temporalities of the now? How do we *feel* the atmospheres of this now? How does openness feel? What is its temperature?

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):1–5
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101611
ISSN 2057-7176

In this first of our two-part open volume, we rehearse openness through placing in relation a diverse span of field orientations, traversing sense-making, initiation rituals, dramaturgy, musicology, temporality, and somatics. Much of what is hosted in this first volume is underpinned by experiences of time and temporality—as contributor Sarah Fine suggests, sometimes, a moment emerges, in the midst of it all, that wills something into being. This issue too, has its own temporalities.

For this iteration and moving forward, [Margins]—our section dedicated to creative and non-standard approaches to the manifold relations that arise at the conjunction between performance and philosophy—is no longer a separate section but is integrated into the journal. This will enable us to invite, and hold space for, the many ways in which form acts as a site of inquiry and research across the journal, and pay attention to the dramaturgies that can emerge in relation to each volume and issue.

A number of [Margins] articles in this issue tend to questions of sense-making, turning to the interstices between languages, feelings, and performance by thinking as and through the play as a theatrical form. In 'Philosophy with All the Feels', Sarah Fine probes at actions, process, philosophies, and politics of *willing*. In this piece, the lecture becomes process, encounter, and event as it moves us through theatrical markers, like an audience, or a 'work', towards reflections on the imperatives of willing in the midst of turbulence. In this performance lecture, Fine sets out an invitation to explore how we facilitate and hold spaces of wonder and openness in relation to the matters of lives that often feel like they get in the way. In *SPEECH/ACT*, Katie Schaag explores the resonances of linguistic performativity, thinking through the politics, registers, and affective climates of performative actions and language. Schaag grants the Act a leading role, as distinct from but also embroiled with Speech in this performative text. Sketching what she terms a 'dematerialised theatre of the mind', Schaag probes at the edges of what felicitous performative utterance might do and mean, whilst holding space for the existential dread that underpins our experiences of climate change. In her play, the errant and the instructive—such as formal elements of script-writing or aspects of dramaturgical composition—are mobilised, emerging through and as breaks and utterances that are metatheatrical. Form, then, cannot be separated from its materiality.

In Alexandra Baybutt and Anna Leon's collaborative [Margins] piece 'Not All Lateness Is the Same', an assemblage of scores, paratexts, and a glossary shape an inquiry into the circumstance of being late, across multiple contexts, through the prism of a movement practitioner and researcher and a dance historian. Baybutt and Leon propose this as a dialogue between a number of intersecting encounters: the role of spacetime in particular choreographic practices, in theory and practice, concept and movement. To Baybutt and Leon, lateness is a kind of leak 'out of specific epistemic frameworks that defines modes, limits, and values of knowledge production', performing lateness in the formal and epistemic edges of the work itself. The scores place various instructions—from attending a performance without being late, to group choreographies—with epistemic frameworks that might frame these as invitations. As readers, we move across these scores that perform the

knowledge systems that they dialogue with or emerge from. The invitation Baybutt and Leon give is to see how these scores unfold as action and translations.

The calls put forward in these [Margins] pieces find resonant responses elsewhere in the journal's open submissions. In 'Performative Utopias: Making Space, Taking Time, Doing Differently?', Teemu Paavolainen challenges the 'anti-utopian prejudice' latent in so-called 'realist' ideologies. Instead, Paavolainen argues that realism should be understood in terms of its performative effects, one of which is the brining into being the impression that utopias are impossible; that is, they are actively 'made impossible' by the material conditions of capitalist extractivism that deny the time and space that are the necessary preconditions for utopian being. Paavolainen builds on recent work in Utopian Studies, such as Jerry Burkette's argument that utopia is not a thing but 'something that people do', and hence should be understood as a verb, a mode of doing. Paavolainen's essay examines the interchangeable notions of 'utopia' and 'reality' as performative (understood as made and un-made by repetition, common sense, bureaucratic / coercive processes) and thus offers utopia as a matter of performing differently in the present; to take time, make space and sustain oppositional practices until they become normative. 'To utopia', then, is to reclaim time by doing time differently, to give space for slow imagination and to cultivate 'a theoretical practice of perceiving otherwise'—perhaps modelled precisely in the kinds of scores given by Baybutt and Leon, for example.

Similarly, Christina Kapadocha's account of her practice-as-research project *Are We Still in Touch?* describes a microtopian undertaking, in which the experiential and somatic modes offered by performance practices might be the grounds for 'fleshy' intersubjectivity, 'potentially opening new pathways for relational and societal transformation.' Kapadocha draws on a trajectory of phenomenological ethics from Maurice Merleau-Ponty through Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey to complicate a universalizing tendency of 'the body' that is latent in some somatic practices, instead foregrounding difference and differentiation. 'How about a touch that doesn't want to change/to direct/to push/to press/how about a touch that listens, sees/an interplay of the senses,' she asks. The publication here, enriched with step-by-step video documentation, offers itself as both reading and experiential process.

A fleshy ethics is also explored in Yu-Chien Wu's 'I Love *to* You and Cut *on* Me: A Call from the Surface,' which rethinks the act of wounding in performance, on both skin and latex, through the prism of philosophy, proposing the emergence of 'hyperreal painfulness' as pure representations that in fact, enact pain. Moving away from Peggy Phelan's articulation of the wound as a vanishing point for that which is unrepresentable, Wu focuses on performances of wounding by Franko B, SUKA OFF, and VestAndPage to argue against a transmission of trauma or pain, proposing that wounds in these instances are separate from the subject experiencing suffering. Wu finds resonances between Luce Irigaray's notion of irreducibility and Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction to propose that wounds' ethical weight lies beyond their intention or seduction. As in Kapadocha's analysis of her own practice, Wu emphasizes the importance of separation in the intersubjective encounter, as exemplified by Irigaray's insertion of "to" into the phrase "I love *to* you."

Crucially, an aspect of the 'open' for Performance Philosophy as a field, and *Performance Philosophy* as a journal, concerns openness between and across epistemological geographies and territories—thinking not only with European words and concepts, for example—as well as different domains of creative practice. As examples of the former, in this issue we find Mischa Twitchin taking inspiration from the Chinese concept of *shi*, and Shalom Ìbírónkẹ́ and Yemi Atanda expanding on the pan-African principle of Ubuntu; and of the latter, a pair of articles by Giuseppe Torre and Joshua Bergamin and Christopher A. Williams separately consider related phenomena of the human-assemblage interactions that take place within musical performance.

The contribution by Twitchin, 'Dramaturgical Potential: Is it Necessary?' uses the question of necessity as a way to resist the gravitational pull of classical dramaturgy terminology, explanation, and normativity. Through translation as both a conceptual and practical endeavour, from Greek inheritances to Chinese concepts such as propensity [*shi*], neutral efficacy, and the concept of *dao*, it recasts dramaturgy as an emergent, non-dogmatic attentive awareness of what matters in assemblage: the unfinished as a condition for thought, for chance and for ethical practice. In contrast, Ìbírónkẹ́ and Atanda's approach is more ethnographic than theoretical, taking as its subject the practice of highly orchestrated initiation ceremonies at the beginning of academic studies for new Theatre Arts students, which has become fairly widespread in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. 'Decolonising the Stage' reworks these ceremonies as philosophically important transition rituals. Based on Ubuntu and mytho-ritual frameworks, this essay suggests that the embodied pedagogies (dressing, arriving on time, processions, singing) of these ritualised ceremonies do not simply socialise students into a discipline, but rather establish an ethics of relational being and collective responsibility, challenging Eurocentric assumptions regarding professional competence and theatrical legitimacy. This contribution posits that the site of theatre education is already a locus of decolonial praxis and cultural affirmations

In 'Digital Instruments: Extensions or Media?', Giuseppe Torre revisits both classical and emergent media theory to analyze the differences between a variety of different kinds of human-instrument relationships, displaying varying degrees of digitized and amplified modifications to the player-instrument apparatus. Torre departs from post-phenomenological accounts to insist that certain ontological distinctions emerge with the presence of digitizing technology, complicating ideas of embodiment and generating hermeneutic relationships that 'necessitate signification and translation.' And in 'On Sense-making, Groove, and Choice in Experimental Improvised Music,' Joshua Bergamin and Christopher A. Williams contest the idea that improvisation is necessarily 'free'. Instead, they draw on enactivist philosophers Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo's account of 'participatory sense-making' to consider the ways in which the need to make sense of what is happening, literally as well as conceptually, acts as a (generative) constraint on improvisation. Agency is not individualized, but distributed throughout the music-making assemblage, as exemplified in their analysis by the way that 'groove' functions as an emergent organizing principle. They explore this dynamic through 'phenomenological interviews' with members of the Splitter Orchester, whose work is featured and analysed in the article.

These various articles and interventions, then, are both responses to an open call and issuers of a call of their own: to read, to listen, to will, to utopia, to initiate. Taken together, these essays form a coherent sequence of de-colonial re-situation, performative re-worlding and dramaturgical re-formulation. Performance emerges as a communal ethic, a utopian practice of creating space in hostile realities and a disciplined openness to the unfinished which in turn may allow us to imagine, and therefore enact, new paradigms of care, agency, and relation through performance.

The second part of this volume, forthcoming in 2026, will present further invitations: to make zines with earthworms, to dance and be danced by the weather, to spill into the margins. We thank our diverse contributors for their patience and their imagination as we gather these works together, and we are grateful to our many peer reviewers for helping to ensure the quality and clarity of the propositions here. And we thank you, our readers, for attending to these calls in the ways that they meet you.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY WITH ALL THE FEELS

SARAH FINE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

1. Preamble

This piece is written to be performed in front of an audience. It can also be read as a paper, in the way that a play is written to be performed but can also be read as a script. Like a play, it includes stage directions. Square brackets signal a stage direction. All stage directions appear on slides on the screen behind the speaker throughout the performance. The slides feature as 'boxes' in the written text you are reading.

The setting is a university lecture hall or seminar room, with stage space at the front for the speaker, and lecture style seating for the audience. The audience faces the speaker.

The audience is expecting to see an academic philosophy research presentation ('paper') from an academic researcher specialising in philosophy ('the speaker').

Here is the first slide:

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):6–38
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101531
ISSN 2057-7176

[SPEAKER: Invite the audience into the room. Hand out a pen and a blank sheet of paper to each audience member as they enter. Direct them to their seats. 'Flashdance… What a Feeling' by Irene Cara is playing on the screen.]

[Title slide appears.]

[SPEAKER: Walk onto the stage slowly and deliberately. Look out at the audience. Take a moment, and then begin lecture performance.]

2. Performance begins

Hello.

How are you feeling?

Really. How are you feeling right now? I'm interested.

Excited? Tense? Stressed? Apprehensive? Tired? Hungry?

Please make a mental note of it.

Would you mind turning to the person next to you and asking them how they're feeling? Go ahead.

First, we will dim the lights.

> *[Lights are dimmed. The following passage is a recording, read by an artist in a calming voice.]*
>
> https://soundcloud.com/performancephilosophy/sarah-fine-welcome
>
> "Hello everyone. I want to invite you to this space. If you want to write some notes, write some notes. If you want to take pictures, feel free to take some pictures. If you want to remove your coat, remove your coat. If you'd like to stand, stand up. If you want to sit, sit down and relax. Whatever makes you feel comfortable."

The noise, the pressures, the deadlines, the responsibilities, all the things weighing you down, the stuff you're doing after this—let's see if we can leave the distractions of the rest of the world outside for the remainder of our session, and just be here together now.

If you have been to a theatre performance, think about your experience of going to the theatre. You physically travel there. As you enter the building, you leave the humdrum, day-to-day world outside. You are inside now. The light is different. The air smells different. You pass through narrow walkways, into a darkened space. No mobile phones, no laptops. There's an atmosphere, a buzz, an energy in the room. Eventually a hush descends. The curtain rises, and off we go.

3. Official start

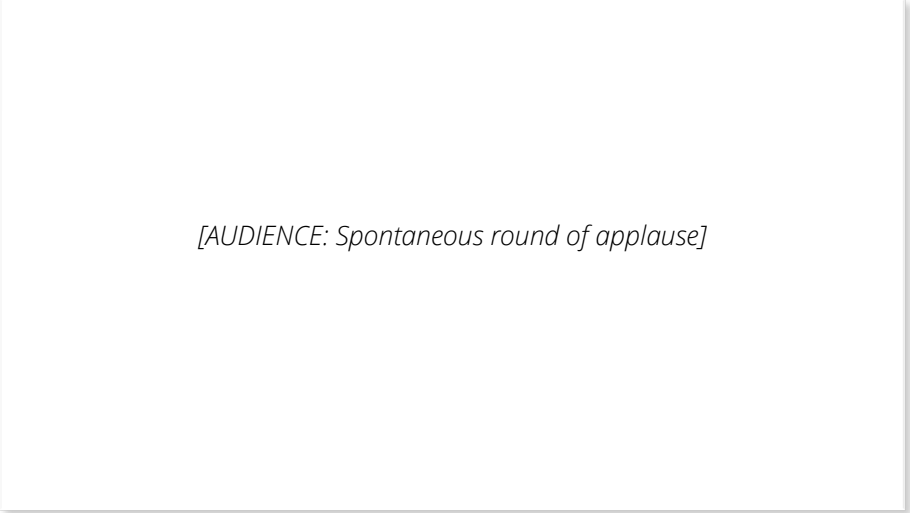
On Tuesday the 16th of May 2023, I willed this piece of work into existence.

On Monday the 15th of May 2023, there was but a title, an offbeat idea, and a twinkle in my eye.

In the midst of term-time teaching duties, conferences, admin roles, other writing commitments, family responsibilities, and the inevitable bouts of existential angst, a half day clear of meetings emerged in my schedule.

That was my moment. And, as I say, during that short time I willed this very piece of work into existence. In fact, the opening line about willing the work into existence somehow materialised in my mind and inspired me to do what needed to be done in order for the work to come into existence.

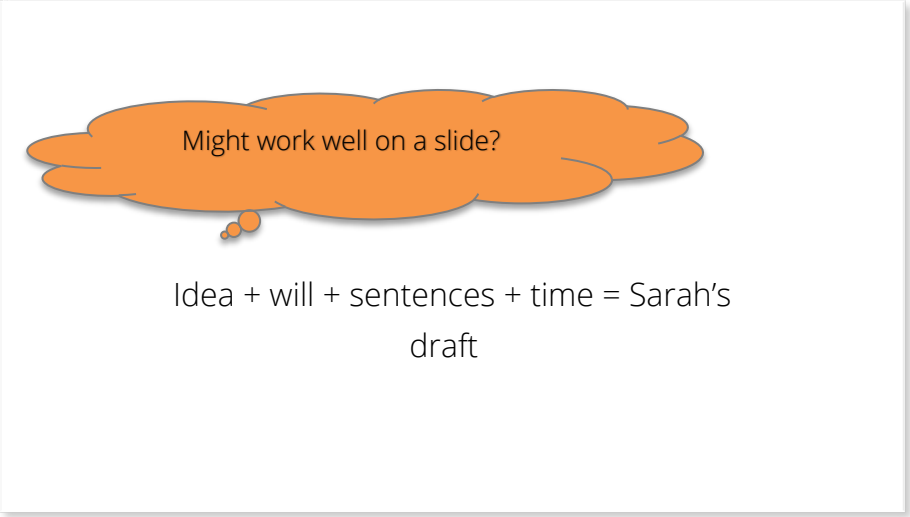
Isn't that exciting?



Thank you.

It's often said that academics don't really do or make anything, but come on! We make things. We make talks, for example.

Of course I do not mean that this piece of work came into existence by sheer force of will alone. The will was not sufficient. Some other basic elements were involved as well, not least the actual forming and assembling of sentences and writing them down. Moreover, I began writing the talk in earnest on the 16th of May, and I needed a number of additional days to complete a full draft of it.



The 'will' part was necessary in the creation of this piece of work and I think it was the key component in its coming to be. I feel certain that, without my having willed it, this piece would not be with us today.

Not all academic outputs rely quite so much on acts of will in this way. A while ago I asked a colleague how his research was going, and he replied to the effect that quite accidentally he seemed to have written a book. That reminded me of Sir John Seeley's (1883, lecture 1) well-known line that the British acquired an empire 'in a fit of absence of mind'. Accidents do happen, I suppose. However, I suspect that books and empires are likely to require some willing to come into existence and usually are not acquired in fits of absence of mind. Furthermore, the will is going to be implicated at some point in the process of publishing a book and maintaining an empire (I presume).

As this is a philosophy event, no doubt you are already worrying about what I mean by 'will'. Philosophers worry, feel anxious, are troubled, have niggles and concerns and doubts about things like that. We know they do, because at the end of a seminar they often start their questions with 'I have a worry about your conception of "will"'. That is part of how we perform philosophy with each other. We don't usually put up our hand in the Q & A session and say, 'Just keep doing what you're doing!' We express our worries and concerns and niggles and doubts about other people's attempts to contribute to a debate.

Let me try to assuage those worries for now by emphasising that I do not plan to be too technical about the idea of 'willing' in this context. I mean something akin to 'applying one's mind to making something happen'.

So far I have tried to establish that some things—like this talk—can be (at least in part) willed into existence. On the 15th of May 2023 there was no 'talk' of which to speak, and today there is one (or at least the appearance of one—more on that later…).

Interestingly, it looks as though we as individuals can will pieces of work into existence by ourselves. In the grand scheme of things, willing an academic talk into existence is relatively straightforward. We professionals often do it multiple times a year.

But still, isn't it wonderfully creative? We bring things into being! Isn't that thrilling? And empowering?

If I were a performance artist presenting my art to you today, I could have walked onto this stage and said that you would witness me willing an artwork into existence, and the performance itself could have been the art. And the thing would have happened in the willing and the expressing of the willing. Sadly, owing to convention, my piece of nominally philosophical work requires more words and more writing than that, but still it isn't all that different.

Anyway, individuals can will all sorts of things into being.

4. Audiences

Now here you might be worrying that I have omitted something important from the picture. I said that I as an individual willed this piece of work into existence and that an artist can will an artwork into existence. But some of you might be thinking that the existence of an academic *paper* or an *artwork* also relies on an audience that recognises the thing as 'a paper' or 'an artwork'. Without that audience and its recognition we do not have an academic paper or an artwork.

In fact, observant listeners may have noticed that I have been careful about referring to this as an academic 'paper', and for precisely this reason. Given the way things are going at the moment, you might be wondering whether what we have on our hands is straightforwardly a paper at all.

Moreover, in advance of delivering this talk to an audience, when it was just words on a page, I didn't and couldn't know exactly what I had on my hands. The product is (in many respects) the performance itself—what's happening here and now—and that part needed *you*.

How it goes today will be a negotiation between you, the audience, and me, the speaker.

This is an encounter between *us*, and it matters that *you* are here.

The product will be different when the audience is different.

Perhaps in these examples the individual on their own can only do so much, and beyond that we need more than the individual for such things as recognition, reception, witnessing, reaction and so forth. But this is all fine, as we shall see.

[SPEAKER: Pause]

I am just going to pause for a moment again and invite you to make a little mental note of how you are feeling *right now*. More specifically, how are you feeling in response to what you've seen from me and what I have said so far? Be honest.

I wager that some of you are feeling on edge, a bit frustrated, a bit uneasy. You're not following. 'Who is this joker? Is this *postmodern*? Is she going to get to the point any time soon? Does she even have a point? What time does it finish? My seat isn't very comfortable. I wonder if have any new emails….'

Just acknowledge and register your feelings. We will return to them. And we will return to think more about *you*, the audience.

5. Willing

Back to 'willing'. I said I 'willed the talk into existence.' Why am I using the language of 'will'? Would it be better to use words like 'consciously' or 'deliberately' or 'intentionally' or 'with purpose' or 'motivation'?

Well, 'willing' was the word that came to me when I thought about my process.

Perhaps the answer lies in something autobiographical.[1]

Maybe it relates to one of my own formative philosophical experiences: my encounter with the work of Thomas Hobbes when I was young and impressionable. Famously, Hobbes (1651, chapter 6) describes the 'Will' as 'The Last Appetite in Deliberating'.

Or maybe it relates to an even earlier set of formative experiences.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family and community in Britain. Back then a figure I heard a lot about was another T.H.: Theodor Herzl, author of the pamphlet 'The Jewish State', published in

1896. For our purposes the important point is that Herzl was associated with this line, which I heard over and over again in my childhood: 'if you will it, it is no dream.'

Those of you who have watched *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers 1998) may be familiar with the line, too. John Goodman's character, Walter, explains that he is quoting Herzl when he says, 'if you will it, dude, it is no dream.'

I had reservations about mentioning Herzl and that quotation, for obvious reasons.

And now I suspect at least some of you are feeling tense and worried that I might be about to discuss a difficult and divisive subject. You may be wondering where I am going with this.

Have you sat up straight or leaned forward in your seat? Are you frowning? Has your pulse quickened? Has your jaw clenched? Have you changed your mind about me? Are you losing interest?

I mentioned the example primarily to explain that, from a young age, the importance of *willing* for making things (especially unlikely things) happen was impressed upon me.

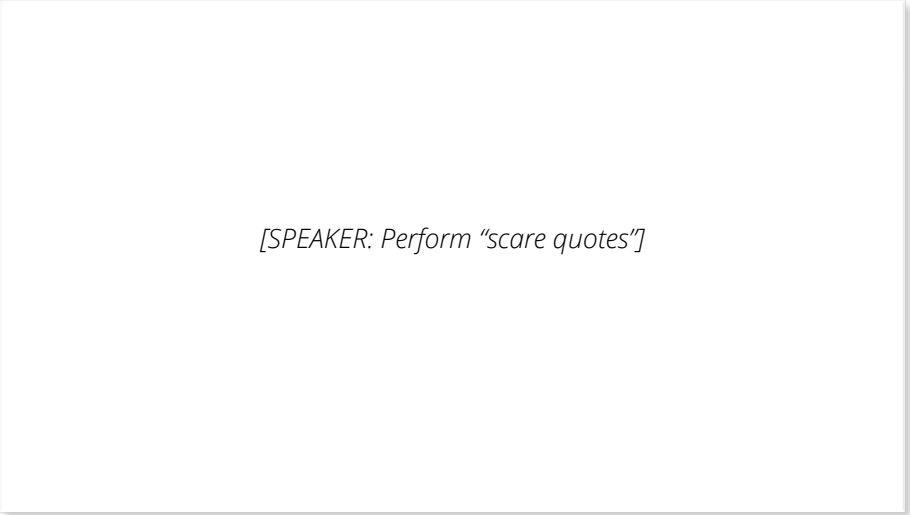
You may have guessed already that in adulthood I have strayed far from the path of Orthodox Judaism. My own children know nothing of Theodor Herzl. However, they do know a lot about another European thinker, Mikel Arteta (current manager of Arsenal Football Club). We are Arsenal fans. In the 2022–23 football season Arsenal were at the top of the Premier League Table for much of the campaign, and looked to be on course to win the league title for the first time since 2004. Then things started to go wrong, and Manchester City took the lead. One of my daughters began talking about how she was 'manifesting' a win for Arsenal. She was willing Arsenal to regain the top spot and she was willing Manchester City to fall behind. Sadly, at her young age, she has learned—as all Arsenal fans must—that willing isn't everything.

From the outside it may look as though there isn't enough of a connection between my daughter's willing and Arsenal's winning/losing. She is too separate from the Arsenal players. Or maybe the force of her willing wasn't quite strong enough and the willing wasn't sufficiently geographically proximate to the players. However, when 60,000 fans in a stadium noisily try to will their team to victory, the willing often seems to do some work. Willing is curious like that.

So, sometimes we apply our minds to making something happen but the thing doesn't happen. And some things can happen by serendipity, seemingly without our willing them.

But let's keep thinking about cases where we apply our minds to making something happen (i.e. they don't happen just by serendipity) and where it seems possible that applying our minds may indeed help the thing to happen (i.e. there could be some connection between the willing and the happening).

Now in addition to worrying about the concepts in play here, you may also be worrying about the form in which they are being presented. As I said, maybe you're questioning whether this is, strictly speaking, 'a philosophy paper'.



6. 'Philosophy' and 'paper'

We have conventions about the form of a philosophy paper. We may be happy for people to toy with the conventions a bit, e.g. peppering in some poetry, adding a little smackerel of humour, omitting lines like 'section 7 raises an objection and section 8 concludes'. But overall we expect our colleagues to stick to the (usually unspoken) basic rules.

Let me just pull apart those two things—'philosophy' and 'paper'—for a moment and focus on the 'paper' bit. It is certainly true that this is not your usual paper.

In April 2023, philosopher Helen De Cruz Tweeted a lovely thread about the different forms philosophy takes and has taken over the centuries.[2] These include (among others) dialogues, aphorisms, travelogues, pamphlets, confessions, speeches, verse, autobiography, and plays. De Cruz herself shared her work across a variety of media, from blogs and interviews, to books with her own illustrations (De Cruz 2021). Kristie Dotson presented a letter to science fiction writer Octavia Butler as her 2023 talk to the Aristotelian Society (a philosophy society founded in London in 1880). G. A. Cohen's book, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (2001) began life as his series of ten Gifford Lectures in 1996. Chapter 7, 'Ways That Bad Things Can Be Good: A Lighter Look at the Problem of Evil', comprises a single paragraph. Cohen (2001) explained that his seventh lecture of the series 'could not be reproduced' in print, 'because it was a multimedia exercise: the audience accepted my invitation to sing with me, to the accompaniment of tapes, a set of American popular songs that illustrate how bad things can be good' (116).

There is no rule that philosophy has to take shape in academic paper form, or indeed in monograph form.

In fact, there may be—no, more forcefully, there *are*—good reasons for philosophy to assume forms other than papers and academic monographs in some circumstances.

We academics are creative thinkers. Why limit ourselves in this way when there are so many options?

Is it fair to say that there's a wariness of non-paper/monograph forms of philosophy—at least, as 'research'—in the current so-called analytic philosophical tradition? I think of myself as a product of the analytic tradition, though I confess I do dabble.

What about the writing and speaking style? Martha Nussbaum (1990) described conventional philosophical prose as 'remarkably flat and lacking in wonder' (3). Isn't that interesting, though? Aren't most of us initially attracted to philosophy because it feeds our sense of wonder at the world?

Today I want to present something philosophical (or at least 'of philosophical interest') but I have crafted and styled it differently from a regular philosophy paper.

Let's assume that a regular philosophy paper is constructed in the form of an argument with clear premises and a conclusion, and with the aim of trying to convince the audience that the author is correct about something. The convincing is to be achieved entirely via the argument, supported by various kinds of evidence. The structure is focused on highlighting the author's defence of their cogent position.

There will be some of that here, and in a sense I want this to be recognisably philosophical.

I certainly want to show something.

But I have other goals as well.

I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed.

I want you to feel attentive and open.

I want you to be entertained.

I want to make space for us to have an experience together.

I want to try to do something with us, the group of people in the room, at this time, right now.

So I am going to play with the form. With the staging. The slides.

I want to see if we can feel and do something. Something *together*.

And let's see if we're still happy to say that it is philosophy.

More boldly still, I wonder whether we, here today, can will something into existence.

[AUDIENCE: Audible intake of breath]

I have high hopes for us!

Let's see!

7. Feelings

Can we revisit how we're feeling?

[SPEAKER: Scan audience faces for expressions of disapproval and/or signs of boredom]

Why have I been asking? I wanted to draw our/your attention to our/your feelings.

Let's turn the spotlight onto ourselves as audience members for a moment.

When we know we are in a philosophy seminar/lecture/conference/workshop, and we are about to listen to a philosophy talk, we have a set of expectations about what we are going to see and hear and how we ought to behave and to react.

We are primed. We try our best to concentrate, to listen out for the key points and moves. We know that at the end there will be time for questions.

That is usually part of the choreography of talks and we are prepared for that.

Some of us feel responsible for asking a question, or at least for having one at the ready just in case, particularly if the talk is in our area of expertise and/or if we are the chair and we are worried that there won't be many questions. Some of us will feel too nervous to ask a question or will ask a question despite the nerves. But as we listen to the talk, whatever else we're doing, many of us will be forming questions in our minds.

What's more, because philosophical work is usually presented in the form of arguments, questions tend to take the form of disagreements: objections to the argument, or responses to the objections, or critical notes on interpretation, and so on. They vary of course, but they are usually presented as a challenge to the speaker. And then the questioner herself has to be ready to respond to the speaker's reply. This can go back and forth for some time.

Lots of us here presumably take pleasure in performances that follow that model. Or at least have grown to accept and expect it.

It can be productive in helping us all test out our ideas, clarify our thoughts, try to assemble them clearly, and defend our arguments against objections, etc.

Norms evolve over time. I think it is less common now for audience members in philosophy talks to seek a 'gotcha' moment and/or to hope to reduce presenters to quivering wrecks who wish to disavow every word they've said, but that was *de rigeur* in philosophy seminars in the twentieth century. In David Edmonds' (2023) biography of Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit, Edmonds mentions how Parfit disapproved of boxing but worried whether that attitude was consistent with his love of a philosophical 'slugfest' (82).

Needless to say, whatever its virtues and vices, that model is not for everyone or for every environment or indeed for every topic.

So would it be too much to say that when we come to a philosophy talk we have a variety of expectations about what will we hear and we are primed to prepare ourselves for listening and thinking critically about what is offered to us?

Towards the beginning of my talk were you feeling frustrated? Uncomfortable?

Were all sorts of objections forming in your mind? Are you feeling that way now?

Of course it is fine if you were/are in that camp. As I say, my sense is that we are primed to think and feel like that in this sort of context.

I am not sure quite how to put this, but I wonder whether we can give ourselves permission to switch off or stand down those critical receptors for a short while.

Instead of approaching this as a *critical* exercise, let's try to approach it as an *exploratory* one.

So please, take a deep breath. Where I'm taking us doesn't require critique (at least not yet). But it does require a kind of openness to a new experience.

Right. Who's coming with me?

https://tenor.com/view/jerry-maguire-tom-cruise-renee-zellweger-whos-coming-with-me-whos-coming-gif-15147960

People of my generation may associate that line with Tom Cruise's character in the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*.

Jerry is flying high in Sports Management International, a large, successful sports agency. He experiences a crisis of conscience and has a revelation that he ought to be doing things differently. He writes a mission statement with a vision for the company's future and sends a copy to everyone in his agency. He describes it as 'touchy feely'. The mission statement is critical of the way things are being done, and—worse—calls on the company to take on fewer clients and focus less on making money. While his colleagues praise the ethics of the mission statement to Jerry's face, it is clear they have no intention of doing anything differently. Unsurprisingly, Jerry is fired. In a memorable scene he stands in the middle of the office floor and asks his uncomfortable colleagues, 'who's coming with me?' Silence.... In the end, only Dorothy Boyd from Accounts (Rene Zellweger) agrees to go with him. The moment they leave, the office activity resumes and all returns to normal.

Lessons numbers 1 and 2: if you want people to come with you, don't start by telling them they're doing things wrong, and don't offer an alternative that looks less attractive than what they already have.

Am I saying this to myself or to us?

I suppose it is both, but I intend the point to be outward- rather than inward-facing.

One general problem with confronting people and telling them they are wrong is that often it doesn't convince them that they are wrong. We do not like to be wrong, and we definitely do not like to be told we are wrong (Schulz 2010). Whether it is an impassioned mission statement or a heated debate, telling people they are wrong often generates effects at odds with the speaker's intentions. It can prompt the interlocutor to disagree, and even to distance themselves from the speaker and/or dislike and dismiss them.

This is important, full stop. And it is very important in political contexts, as democratic theorists highlight. It might be wonderful if all we cared about was getting to the truth of the matter on whatever subject, regardless of how that truth is delivered. But that doesn't seem to be the case.

As I mentioned, in philosophy settings, we are primed to be told we are wrong, to tell other people they are wrong, and to disagree.

Even though arguments are our stock in trade, philosophers are alive to the fact that arguments may not be the best way of convincing people who disagree.

As Catarina Dutilh Novaes puts it:

> … a wealth of empirical and anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that arguments are in fact not very efficient tools to change minds.… For example, the well-documented phenomenon of polarization… suggests that, when exposed to arguments supporting positions different from their prior views, people often (though perhaps not always) become even more convinced of their prior views rather than being swayed by arguments.… Frequently, argumentative encounters look rather like games where participants want to 'score points'… rather than engage in painstaking consideration of different views for the sake of epistemic improvement. (2023, 173–4)

Now in our typical philosophy context, where we are primed to disagree, do we feel open, receptive, and welcoming to fresh ideas and ways of doing things?

I have put that as a question, because I don't want to assume that you feel the same way as I do. But let me propose that, without an audience that approaches the encounter with a kind of openness to the new experience, the speaker/writer has to work extremely hard to bring the listener/readers even to a point where they are even really listening/reading, rather than just waiting to spot a trigger for their formulating of an objection.

Why does this matter?

Political philosophy and ethics are interesting examples on which to reflect.

These are subject areas which deal with controversial issues. They aim to invite us to think deeply about what to believe and what to do. As philosophy, though, they often engage in that enterprise by telling people how, why, and to what extent they are mistaken. That kind of conflict and adversarialism is not especially appealing to everyone.

Of course it has its place. But it is not the only way.

Think back to how you felt when I mentioned Theodor Herzl, a central figure in the development of modern Zionism. That always has been a contentious topic, and it is a particularly fraught one now. For some of you it might not be a subject that immediately gets your hackles up, whereas for others it will prompt very difficult feelings.

There are different ways for me, as speaker, to attend to that. If I don't want you to feel alienated, to switch off, to assume something (possibly incorrect) about me and about the direction in which we are heading, or to become unreceptive to what follows, then I need to be aware of how I approach the subject matter.

So we are back to feelings.

Nowadays I often go to art galleries with my young(ish) children. It is an experience, but I would not say it is an altogether relaxing one.

However, when I go by myself or with other adults, I find it almost meditative (as long as the gallery isn't too busy). It is peaceful. It is calming. Often the galleries are designed with the visitor experience in mind.

I don't suppose I would find it quite so calming if I were visiting as an art critic. Part of the appeal of the experience for me is that it is not really my job, and that I can 'switch off' my work mind. Even when I am there for things that are more about my job, I still find the context far more calming than a university lecture theatre.

But the key point here is that the set-up is designed at least in part with the audience's experience in mind: to bring us in, to welcome us, to engage us, to help us navigate the space.

Of course they can be deliberately confronting, eery, alienating. Directors, curators, choreographers can make spaces hostile and so forth. But that is usually conscious and intentional. They think about how to receive us, what will meet us, and which kind of feelings they would like to provoke in us.

So how we are encouraged to feel as we enter a space, a session, a discussion is important.

Some things can turn us off straight away. Others can welcome us in and spark our interest.

One of things I am inviting us to reflect on is how we bring our readers, listeners, students into a space, a session, a discussion, a set of reflections.

Are we fostering atmospheres conducive to openness and curiosity and wonder?

A second thing I am inviting us to reflect on is how and why that openness and curiosity and wonder itself might matter.

If, in a given space, a speaker wants to invite openness and curiosity, she may want to resist, or think very carefully before, using some of the language we find in philosophy seminars, e.g. describing an opposing view as 'ridiculous' or 'crazy' or 'monstrous' or 'trivial' or 'facile' or 'dangerous'.

But in addition, while in seminar contexts on controversial topics we can be very quick to dismiss, we can also be very cautious. For example, on the ethics of migration, we are encouraged to be pragmatic, think about 'feasibility', take seriously the everyday concerns of voters, etc, etc. We are conscious of objections. We pre-empt them. In response we can find ourselves making our proposals smaller and smaller.

Fostering an atmosphere that is conducive to openness and curiosity and wonder might allow us to think bigger and bolder and more creatively in that space.

When I wondered whether we, here, today, could will something into existence, did you feel excited? Or at least intrigued? Isn't it empowering and energising to imagine that we might be able to do and make something together?

This might sound fanciful, but there is a serious point in it.

When we look closer, a number of the ostensibly intractable political crises out there in our world seem to be tractable after all. They are often failures of will.

For example, the so-called migration crisis? At base it is really failure of political will to allow refugees to travel safely in order to seek asylum.

We know that will really matters in politics, both for good and ill. It matters for causes you support, and for projects you oppose.

And of course we know that willing matters in our day to day lives. As I said, I needed to will this very talk into existence!

In short, I think reflecting on the power of willing is potentially philosophically and politically productive.

And we can reflect by *doing*.

8. Reflecting by doing

So let's try something together.

At the beginning of this session I distributed blank pieces of paper to everyone.

Their moment has come.

We are going to think through three things.

1. Is there some piece of work that you've really, really wanted to do? Perhaps there is an innovative approach you'd like to take, a fresh topic you'd like to tackle, an argument you want to construct, some unorthodox material you'd like to use, but you have been deterred, for some reason. Perhaps you are worried people will think it's too 'out there', too 'bold', too different, too optimistic, too weird, too dreamy, too off the beaten track, not 'proper' philosophy. Is there something that you would like to try, but you need that extra bit of encouragement? Perhaps you're just not sure how to do it?

   Do you have something like that in your life?

   Could you distil that work idea into a sentence?

   Please write that one sentence on your page.

2. Still on the theme of that piece of work:

   What is holding you back? Why haven't you done it?

   Have a think about it.

Can you distil your obstacle into one word?

Please write that one word on your page.

3. Do you have anyone in your life who is the sort of person that makes things happen? A do-er? A go-getter? They have an idea and they bring it to fruition. They tell you they will set up new course or a reading group, and they do it. They say they are going to start a podcast, and you know they will. They mention they will raise large sums of money for a charitable cause, and you are convinced they will make it happen. They want to become a local counsellor, a part-time photographer, a half-marathon runner, and lo and behold....

   Maybe in your life that person is you!

   Anyway, please think for a moment about that do-er. What is it about them that makes these things happen? Imagination? Commitment? Energy?

   Can you distil the essence of that do-er it into one word?

   Please write that one word on your page.

So now on your page you should have:

1. Your idea.
2. What's holding you back from doing it.
3. The essence of your do-er.

You have yours.

It's all yours. You have made that. We have all made one.

Every one of you will have something different.

But we have created those pieces today, here, at the same time, in this space.

So now for the willing part.

I wonder whether we, here today, can will *your piece of work* into existence?

For the next 30 seconds, we will close our eyes and imagine how wonderful it would feel for that piece of work to exist in the world. That piece of work is doable. Even the doing could be enjoyable. You can make it happen.

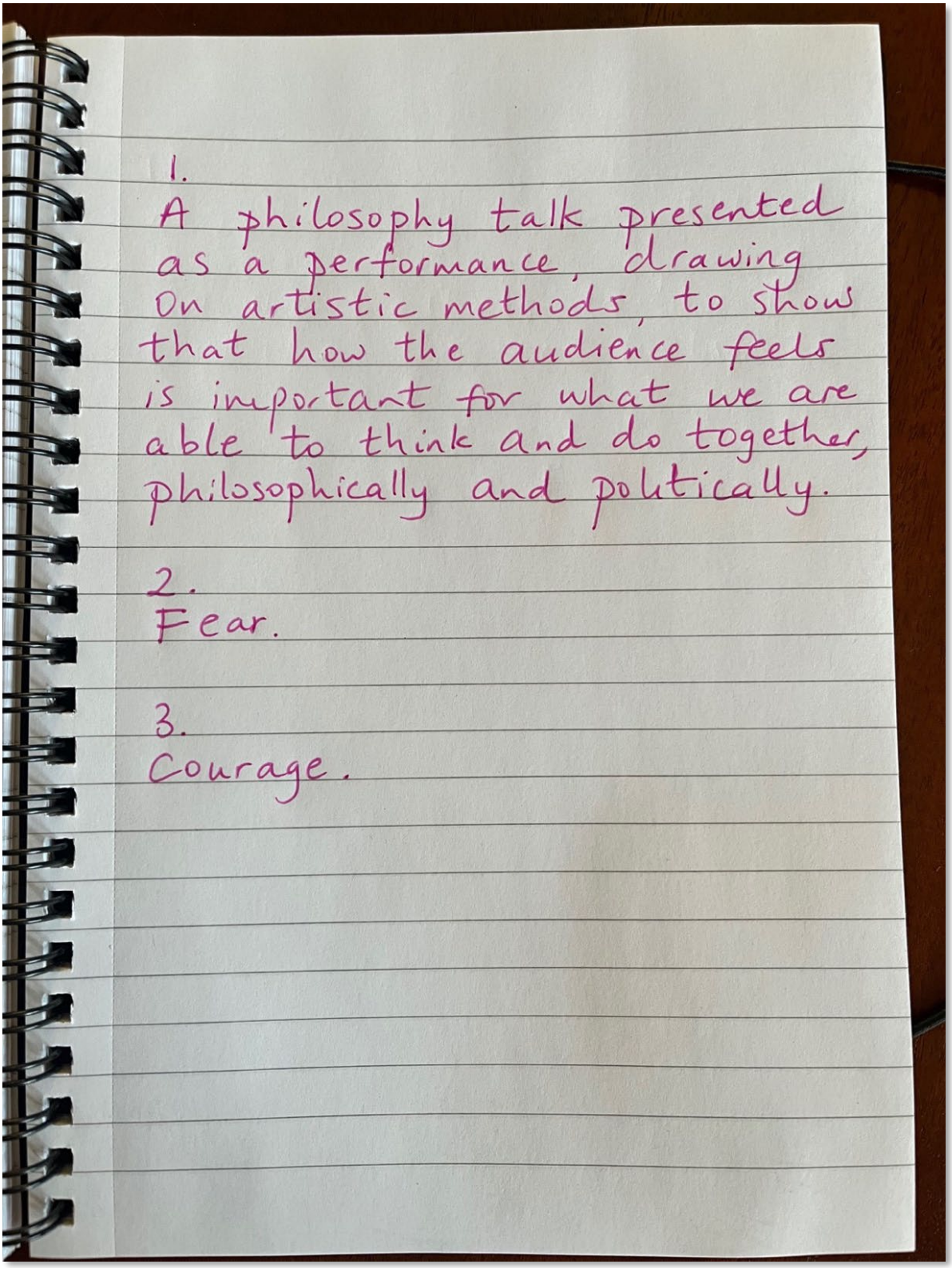
[AUDIENCE: 30 seconds of silent contemplation]

Now, you need to go away after this and do the rest of the work!

But I feel confident you can do that!

Why do I feel that confidence?

Well, look at my own piece of paper:


1.
A philosophy talk presented as a performance, drawing on artistic methods, to show that how the audience feels is important for what we are able to think and do together, philosophically and politically.
2.
Fear.
3.
Courage.

I did it.

We did it.

[SPEAKER: Exclaim 'ta-da!' and perform a 'pulling a rabbit out of a hat' motion]

We shared in that moment.

So, how are you feeling?

And now feel free to pick up your phones and computers, reengage those critical faculties, and continue about your day as normal.

[Video clip from Jerry Maguire *where office resumes normal activity immediately after Jerry's dramatic departure]*

[House lights up!]

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE: Applause.]

[SPEAKER: Smile. Perhaps even give a little head bow if it feels appropriate. Wait for applause to fade. Move to designated place for the Q&A session]

Q & A Session

As with ordinary academic talks, there is a Question and Answer (Q & A) session after the performance.

For a live event, the lecture performance is scripted (exactly as above), and the Q & A session is unscripted. Audience members ask whichever questions it occurs to them to ask, and the speaker responds to those questions, off the cuff.

The audience's spontaneous questions in response to what they have seen and heard are an integral part of this piece of work. It matters that we were all together, experiencing the same thing, and that the work itself will be different when experienced with and by different people.

The following stylised Q & A combines a) the kinds of questions I was asked on the occasions I performed this talk, b) the kinds of questions I wish I had been asked, c) related questions I have been asked on other occasions, and d) questions based on feedback from academic reviewers of the written piece. The answers are my own.

Why am I including a stylised Q & A in the paper/script even though a live Q & A is unscripted and is part of the work?

I am taking this as an opportunity—as in an ordinary Q & A—to continue the conversation in a different form, and to fill in some of the philosophical gaps.

I think the Q & A might be particularly useful following a lecture performance, as it enables the audience to 'peer behind the curtain', and it enables the speaker to do some of the contextualising and theorising and analysing that readers ordinarily expect in an academic talk/paper.

Audience member 1:
Why do you think we academic audiences, perhaps especially philosophy audiences, tend to be quite so critical? Why don't we raise our hands to tell the speaker that we loved the talk and that we agree with them?

Speaker:
Thank you very much. I expect there are multiple reasons, and I think one of those is simply 'convention'. We do what we see others do, and we have seen others doing it this way for a long time.

Conventions do evolve, however, and over the course of my career I have seen what I regard as positive movements on this front. One highlight for me was watching Professor Miranda Fricker deliver a keynote lecture in Australia in 2018. On receiving what I read as an antagonistic question from an audience member, Fricker responded in a collaborative and open manner. In this way, she invited the questioner to contribute constructively to the conversation. It had the subtle effect of shifting the tone in the room, and the remaining Q & A proceeded along those collaborative lines.

On the previous occasions when I delivered this talk, some people asked questions in the style of a conventional philosophy Q & A. I experienced some of those as confrontational, antagonistic, defensive, and so on. I am accustomed to that. Some of it is reasonable and robust disagreement. Sometimes it is an explicit signal that the questioner did not like the material and/or its delivery. Not everyone will like it. I should add, the questioner may appreciate the ambition but may not rate the execution. They may think I didn't do a good job. That's absolutely fine.

Some questioners took the opportunity to defend academic style and substance conventions, which is also perfectly reasonable. They argued, for example, that it is the best way to test out arguments and to make progress on a topic. They said that we should not shy away from being frank in response to what we see as erroneous, trivial, non-starters etc.

As there are multiple forms for disseminating our ideas, no doubt there is space for many different approaches—and in my view that means making space for exploratory lecture performances, too!

By the way, when discussing the Miranda Fricker example, I said that 'I read' a question as antagonistic, and that on previous occasions 'I experienced' some questions as confrontational. That bears repeating, because my reading and reception of a question may diverge from those of other attendees, including the questioner. As Rajni Shah puts it so perfectly, questions 'land differently in different bodies' (in Schmidt et al. 2023, 18).

Audience member 2:
This was fun and I enjoyed it. But what will you do with it now? Normally we give talks and then try to publish the material in paper or book form. Is that what you will do? If you do, isn't there an irony in arguing that there are various, valuable forms philosophy can take, including a lecture performance in front of a live audience, and then choosing to go down the conventional article publication route?

Speaker:

This is an important question. I do want to share this piece of work somehow. Initially I hoped to share it in a range of different formats, including live performance. To be honest, though, when I am invited to speak at academic conferences, seminars and workshops, the hosts usually wouldn't be expecting me to give a talk like this one.... I love the idea of producing a video recording of the performance and 'publishing' that online somewhere, maybe alongside the written text. In its current form it is not a traditional paper (and it probably isn't even a non-traditional paper).

Part of the joy and the challenge for me in experimenting this way is to see whether it will be 'accepted' as philosophy research. At present it is difficult—not impossible, but difficult—for work to be accepted as 'proper research' in philosophy unless it is published in written form. Will it ever see the light of day in written form? (If you are reading this, then the answer is: Yes!)

In addition, I like Jess Richards' (2018) description of a live performance as 'a multi-layered text' with assorted strata of meaning. That also blurs the lines between this piece as performance and this piece as text. It is both. In a way, we can think of the written paper as continuous with—rather than as a break from—the live performance.

There is a further reason for wanting to 'publish' the work (no matter what the format). Here I take my lead from comedian Stewart Lee, and his account of why he likes to film his stand-up shows:

> I really wanted it filmed, because I knew that if you filmed it, that kind of finishes it as a piece of work, so you can stop doing that material. Whether it sold or not, it was really useful to draw a line under it. I was trying to think like an artist or musician who creates a body of work and then moves on to the next thing.[3]

I like to think of publishing in a similar way. The work is released into the public domain, which draws a line under it for now, and I can move onto the next thing. That doesn't mean the work is 'complete' or 'finished' and never to be revisited, but I agree with Lee that some kind of closure is an important part of the creative process.

Audience member 3:

I have seen art students and colleagues deliver lecture performances, but the format didn't strike me as an obvious one for presenting philosophical research at the time. Their performances tended to be quite freewheeling and unstructured, whereas I detected a tight structure in your talk. So, could you say more about why you chose to convey your ideas in this particular mode, and why it works for you?

Speaker:

That is really interesting. There were a number of reasons and inspirations for me to try this. First, I think the format fits perfectly with my aims in the piece. I initially encountered the idea of a lecture performance in the process of collaborating with human rights theatre company, ice & fire, to develop a theatre piece about the ethics of migration restrictions.[4] One of the original collaborators, interdisciplinary artist Rhiannon Armstrong, suggested presenting the piece as a lecture performance. In the end, the show took a different direction, but I was keen to learn more

about lecture performances, as they sounded like a fruitful mixing of theatrical and academic media. Lucia Rainer (2017) proposes that 'lecture performances adhere to two frames that never entirely blend' as 'the concept is always situated between lecture and performance and academia and art—to which they are traditionally affiliated—without entirely being one or the other' (76). That picture appeals to me.

In the course of working with Rhiannon, we attended an academic talk together. As I watched the speaker, I was only (consciously) thinking about the lecture's content, but Rhiannon pointed out various aspects of the 'performance' and the space which would have escaped my attention otherwise. She highlighted the hierarchical organisation of the room, with the speaker on a platform behind a lectern, talking into a microphone. She discussed the lighting, the seating, and the speaker's style of answering (and not answering!) questions. It was really enlightening and exciting to see things from Rhiannon's perspective, and to reflect on the performance side of academic presentations and lectures. What might be bread and butter for performance researchers and practitioners came as a revelation to me. Once I noticed those features I couldn't stop thinking about them. I started to wonder why many of us pay so little attention to the performance of the academic talk/lecture—and, along with that, to the audience experience. Much of what you saw today has its roots in that collaboration. I really learned a lot from working with Rhiannon, and with other theatre-makers through ice & fire, as well as from other performers and performance researchers. I continue to learn from interdisciplinary conversations and research, especially with my long-term collaborator, artist Sivan Rubinstein (whose beautiful voice you heard welcoming you into the space). It is from Sivan that I learned about the true importance of welcoming people into a space. This piece is all about exploring, learning and sharing. I recognise that those well-versed in performance research might find it frustrating to watch that learning happen in real time or on the page, and for that I apologise. I hope it is still instructive to see that those with different disciplinary backgrounds have so much to learn from you.

In addition to the lecture performance considerations, and connectedly, I am big fan of stand-up comedy and I am very interested in it as an art form. For example, it is wonderful to observe the ways in which a single performer captures and maintains the attention of an audience. Coming back to the example of comedian Stewart Lee, in *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-up Comedian* (2011), he wrote that 'since 2004, I've always thought very carefully about pre-show music. It's all part of set and setting. A show begins the moment the audience walks into a venue' (56). I think entrances and atmosphere are crucial, and you've seen that today. In fact, that Lee book plays an important background role in this piece. In the book, Lee publishes a series of his stand-up routines, and includes his own commentary in footnotes, analysing and explaining his own jokes and his process. I thought that would be a great model for this lecture performance, where the Q & A functions in the manner of Lee's footnotes. Lee writes, 'I just think it's funny to take a joke and show the working out in the margins' (100). For me, it's both funny and illuminating. Furthermore, you see from Lee's commentary that he is thinking through and reworking every line of his show, and even the parts that look quite spontaneous often are carefully scripted. The pieces are very tightly structured, and nothing is baggy or irrelevant. I've tried to do something similar

here. I'm also trying to use humour to maintain audience attention, switch up the mood and tone, and sometimes to defy expectations, for example.

While I am thinking about art and performance, a primary concern for me in this piece is also to share ideas and to 'show my working'. Again, the lecture performance is an excellent fit for this. As Clio Unger (2021) has written (in the context of watching the lecture performance series 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', curated by Lola Arias), 'by sharing their work processes as artistic form, the practitioners of the lecture performance not only let audiences observe the intellectual labour they perform to make their art, they allow these modes of labour to become the artwork themselves, blurring the boundaries between "process and product"' (487). This blurring of process and product is exactly what I had in mind when preparing today's lecture.

Another reason is partly contextual. I originally prepared this talk for a British Society of Aesthetics conference on the theme of 'Aesthetics and Political Epistemology' (Liverpool, 2023). I *hoped* that the audience might be receptive to an experimental, arts-based-methods piece, and I thought the format suited the conference theme. That context gave me the courage to try it. I was very nervous, because I knew it wasn't what people were expecting, and I wasn't sure whether the audience would be amenable to it. But the audience did engage with the material, and I found it a really energising experience, so that gave me the confidence and motivation to try again.

Audience member 4:
I would love to present a talk in this kind of format, or at least I would like to experiment with different styles of delivery, but I feel I am not in a position to do that, because I am a student and in a precarious position. I need to write standard academic papers and give conventional talks at this point in my academic career. In a way, isn't this a display of your privilege, in that you have much more freedom and security as a tenured academic?

Speaker:
I take this very seriously, and it is absolutely right that there are far greater pressures to conform to a variety of norms and work within established disciplinary constraints when you are a student and if you don't have a secure academic post. That is a really important point. I am at a career stage and institution where failure isn't quite so crushing. I can't deny that it still hurts, though. While the pressures have not vanished altogether for me (I'm mid-career), they are both easier to resist and less significant. Nothing terrible will happen if audiences don't like what I'm doing, and it isn't a disaster if I am not able to do anything further with this work. So, yes, I acknowledge the privilege, and I wouldn't want to give the impression that it is easy to do this, and/or that everyone should start presenting their work in this way.

At the same time, I feel a responsibility to try to make space for creativity and experimentation, precisely because I am in a position to do that now. In philosophy, and in academia more generally, there is so much potential to innovate, to be adventurous, to push boundaries, and yet it is somehow systematically discouraged. But the more it happens, the more examples we have of different ways of doing things, and the more we increase the options for everyone.

If we want things to change, how do we precipitate change? How do we push boundaries? After watching me try something new during a workshop, and seeing me receive some 'vigorous' criticism in response, another academic wisely said to me: 'Remember that when you push at the boundaries, the boundaries push back.' I have found that to be true. And when you offer something a bit different, you/I have to be prepared for the usual responses, including the familiar and painful, 'Is this even philosophy?'

Something I believe (and have heard it said by a number of people, including Kate Manne in her discussion of misogyny and male entitlement) is that philosophy is what philosophers do.[5] Think of the parallel with art. Early in her career, when Tracey Emin produced pieces such as *My Bed* (1998), some critics would ask, 'Is this even art?' But now that Emin is an established artist people just tend to accept that what she produces is art because she definitely is an artist. Now, to paraphrase Stewart Lee paraphrasing someone else, it is not for me to draw parallels between Tracey Emin and me… But you see my point!

Moreover, I think I've reached a stage where I care about the experimentation enough not to mind about unfavourable reactions. Sometimes my answer to the question 'is this even philosophy?' is 'I don't really mind, but I'm enjoying myself doing it.'

Academic norms have their role, and often I follow them. But what happens if I don't? For example, there is a norm that in philosophy papers you really get into the nitty gritty of one relatively small idea. However, I have lots of ideas and sometimes I want to stick a load of them together and play around a bit. And sometimes I don't want to make an argument following the usual rules. Sometimes I just want to provoke thoughts, or share some ideas, and see how that goes. I think those are valuable exercises. Why shouldn't they get out there? So, yes to the power, but I'm hoping to use it responsibly….

The questions around power and privilege raise another issue that I am trying to show with this piece. In the style of the performance, in the sharing of autobiographical details, in the experimental format, I am aware that I am making myself vulnerable to you. I am opening myself up, and I am inviting you to open up to me and to each other, to the extent that you may be willing to try something together. I am being explicit about that. Although we may not notice and name it, we are mutually (not equally, but mutually) vulnerable as speaker and audience in *any* lecture/seminar context. Speakers may feel unworthy of the invitation, unsure of their material, anxious about their delivery, and nervous about the audience reception, among other things. As I touched on briefly in the talk, audience members may feel worried about the prospect of participating, feel out of place in the space, fear that they have misunderstood, etc. In academic settings, I think this combined sense of vulnerability in lecturer and audience often pushes us to put up our defences. To run with the metaphor, we feel we must be battle-ready and we don our armour. I may need to shield myself against hostile fire, and you may need to ward off attacks with countermoves. But when we recognise this mutual vulnerability, instead we can choose to acknowledge it, reflect on it, consider its effects, and decide how we would like to engage with it. Rather than playing offence and defence, we could try to explore our mutual vulnerability with

sensitivity. That is not to pretend away the realities of power relations and hierarchies, which the question rightly highlights. What is more, since live audiences for this particular piece are not given advance notice that it may be a little different from a conventional philosophy research presentation, I need to be particularly attentive to relations of power.[6]

Audience member 5:
Following on from that discussion, at one stage in the talk you said that you wanted us, the audience, to feel comfortable and relaxed. But I felt very *uncomfortable* and out of my comfort zone. Actually, I think you wanted us to feel uncomfortable! You know that your live audience here is a bunch of philosophers and that many of us won't be comfortable with the music, genre-crossing, interaction, and participatory elements. Did you have that in mind when you prepared the piece?

Speaker:
This is a great point. I am paying attention to how 'the audience' feels, and there were times when I really was attempting (even if failing) to make you all feel comfortable. I wanted you to try something with me. I wanted you to relax. And though I was attending to your feelings, I can't *make* you feel the way I would like you to feel.

Now, I must emphasise that the idea is not to manipulate you or to engage in dark arts so as to accomplish something behind your back without your realising it. Rather, my intention is to highlight that how you feel *matters* for what we are able to achieve here, and that you matter in the making of the work. I say that in order to distinguish between what I am *trying* to do—attend to and draw attention to how you feel with a view to opening up space for exploring ideas together—and something I am *not* trying to do, which is to play with your emotions to push you, say, to change your mind in the absence of careful reflection. I suspect one reason many philosophers remain near-exclusively committed to the 'philosophy research as reasoned argument in plain language' format is related to the longstanding belief in a clear distinction between 'philosophy' (good) and 'rhetoric' and 'sophistry' (generally bad, and/or at odds with philosophical goals). The basic idea is that philosophy is supposed to be oriented towards understanding and to discovering truths, whereas rhetoric and sophistry prioritise other goals, especially *winning,* by means of persuasion, deception, concealment, and other disreputable methods. Of course, as ever, in reality things are far more complicated than that, but I think some such concern might lie behind the resistance to alternative formats.[7] I am not seeking to pull the wool over your eyes. I want you to see what is happening. I want it to be transparent. I want us to do philosophical work together.

Meanwhile, one of the things I'm trying to explore is the potential for creative and open modes of ideas-making and sharing to work effectively not just in philosophical conversation but also in political conversations. There I'm trying to attend to feelings of discomfort (e.g. at the mention of something politically controversial/divisive) and to think about how to make common space for discussion even in those challenging contexts.

Attending to feelings of discomfort is different from ignoring them, and it is also different from wishing those feelings away, or attempting to mollify or placate. There are times—in philosophy, politics, art, and life—when we have to sit with difficult feelings.

You probably detected that I change tone here and there, sometimes speaking of solemn subjects in sombre style, and then moving to gentle humour. This is deliberate. It is not to make light of what is serious. It is to try different ways into difficult topics, both for me and for us. One or other of those ways might not work for you, but might help another member of the audience to continue with the conversation.

Interestingly, I think many people are sceptical of comedy's powers to 'effect social change' and think of it more as a kind of consolation for the harsh realities of the human condition (Setiya 2021). Yet Scott Sharpe, J-D Dewsbury, and Maria Hynes (2014) have studied the ways in which humour (and specifically Stewart Lee's comedy) 'can operate as a kind of *micropolitical* intervention' and they highlight how 'the performative cusp of humour functions as a generative political act, which can subtly modify dominant social norms and structures of anticipation' (116, my emphasis). There are various factors here, and an important one is how performer and the audience cooperate together in the production of 'new sensibilities' (117). Lee presupposes an 'active audience' (Carroll 2014). The audience is an active part of the creative practice, and the performance space becomes a sort of laboratory for change. Sharpe et al. (2014, 121) point out that Lee keeps 'the audience on their toes' and gets them to 'do a lot of the work', and that 'something occurs in the witnessing of the event of a performance that does not occur elsewhere'. I think we can do something similar in and with our philosophical microinterventions. That may require some disruption and discomfort along the way, but it has a lot of potential.

Audience member 6:
The previous questioner said 'you know that your live audience … is a bunch of philosophers', and you seem to be addressing yourself to an anticipated audience of philosophers. For a given live performance your audience may well be composed of philosophers. However, there may be multiple, different audiences of/for your piece, and those audiences may be quite diverse. Are you taking sufficient account of that diversity?

Speaker:
This is a challenging issue to navigate, and thank you for raising it.[8] As you say, there may be plural—temporally, spatially, socially diverse—audiences for this piece. The audience is 'polyvalent' (Alston, 2013). There are the different live audiences at different live events. Live performances may be in person, online only, or 'hybrid' formats (some people attending online and some in person). Then there are audiences watching recorded versions of what once was a live event. In addition, if this is published in written form, there are readers of the text. (Hello! That's *you*.) Furthermore, each collective audience is constituted by diverse individuals.

I have mentioned that the piece was written in the style of a lecture performance, and that the first live audience for the performance were the attendees of the aforementioned 'Aesthetics and Political Epistemology' conference in Liverpool in 2023. Some of the attendees were online, tuning

in from different locations and timezones. For that event, the audience really was expecting a philosophy paper, and I really was expecting an audience of philosophers (at all career stages, including students), and mostly from the so-called 'analytic' tradition. I was envisaging this mode of delivery as novel and experimental for most of that audience, but even then I expected it to be less unusual for them, as an 'aesthetics' group, than it might be for a different group of philosophers. All the same, for understanding the thrust and motivation of the piece, it is helpful to know that it was addressed to an audience of philosophers, real and imagined.

For the lecture performance part of the written text, I really wanted to continue addressing 'the audience' as though it were a live event audience, even though *you* readers are also 'the audience'. The idea was to maintain the structure and immediacy of a performance. But I don't want *you* to feel excluded! The piece offers something different for each spatial and temporal audience, as well as for spectators and readers, and it involves audiences through a variety of dimensions. For example, some audiences do not experience the co-presence or the 'smells and atmosphere' of the live in person audience (Richards 2018, 17),[9] but then the live in person audiences do not get the thrill of seeing the footnotes and the bibliography reserved for you readers…. More seriously, you readers are party to more of the behind-the-scenes analysis.

Once the piece moves from live performance to published text, it takes on a 'life of its own', in the apt words of one reviewer. If it is published in an academic journal, in some sense it will 'sit' in that journal, but in this online and open access age it is effectively unmoored. Among other things, to put it bluntly, that means *you* could be anyone, anywhere, and any time from this point forward! I want *us* to connect, and for this to connect with you, yet I don't know how much or how little we share. Now, a perennial risk for anyone anticipating an audience is that they will misunderstand or misread the audience. And since we have already noted that audiences are internally diverse, we can misread any part of that audience. Similarly, the audience can receive things in unintended ways. In short, I should try my best not to assume too much about you, and vice versa. But I make mistakes and missteps, and despite my sincere efforts I will have assumed too much.

END

Credits

SPEAKER: Sarah Fine

AUDIENCE: You

The formal event draws to a close, and informal conversations commence.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Eve Katsouraki, Diana Damian Martin, and Theron Schmidt, the co-editors of this issue, and to two enormously helpful reviewers for their constructive suggestions and their openness to this piece. Thank you to *Performance Philosophy* for offering a space for experimentation and exploration. An extra thank you to Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, whose boundary-crossing practice and community-building work are an inspiration.

Hearty thanks to the warm and receptive audiences at the British Society of Aesthetics conference, Aesthetics and Political Epistemology, University of Liverpool 2023; the Warwick Graduate Conference in Political and Legal Theory 2024; and the London Aesthetics Forum 2025. Special thanks to Sivan Rubinstein (the recorded voice, and all-round wonderful collaborator), Rhiannon Armstrong, Christine Bacon, Vid Simoniti, Duncan Bell, the Cambridge FWG, and the 1756 group.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Good Integration project, The Research Council of Norway, 313846.

Notes

[1] On the role of autobiography in philosophy, see Fine (2022).

[2] The post is no longer online as De Cruz left the platform, but it was once available here: https://twitter.com/Helenreflects/status/1646509845527375872.

[3] See the full interview here: http://www.mustardweb.org/stewartlee/.

[4] Here is further information about the project: https://iceandfire.co.uk/project/wltmimi/

[5] Manne says it during her podcast interview with Nigel Warburton on *Philosophy Bites*, here: https://open.spotify.com/episode/5Xv05YBGsxY9tnh0smSBRS

[6] For a very interesting treatment of risk and mutual vulnerability in theatre performance, see Alston (2012, 2013).

[7] For further discussion of rhetoric and philosophy, see for example McCoy (2008) and Potkay (2017).

[8] Thank *you*, reviewers! As one of you noted, Emma Bennett (2017) has an excellent discussion of audience spatiotemporal plurality, examining Stewart Lee's 'grammars of address' as he moves between 'you' the live audience and 'you' the television viewers.

[9] Thank *you,* editors! There is a fascinating series of interventions on the subject of 'presence' in performance studies, particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19 lockdowns, in a special issue of *TDR: The Drama Review* edited by Jannarone et al. (2022).

Works Cited

Alston, Adam. 2012. "Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in *Half Cut*." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22 (3): 344–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2012.690742.

Alston, Adam. 2013. "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre." *Performance Research* 18 (2): 128–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.807177.

Bennett, Emma. 2017. "You, The Public: Grammars of Address in Stewart Lee's Stand-Up." *Performance Research* 22 (3): 98–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1346984.

Carroll, Noël. 2014. "The Creative Audience: Some Ways in which Readers, Viewers, and/or Listeners Use Their Imaginations to Engage Fictional Artworks." In *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, edited by Elliot Samuel Paul and Scott Barry Kaufman. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199836963.003.0004.

Cohen, G. A.. 2001. *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029668.

De Cruz, Helen. 2021. *Philosophy Illustrated*. Oxford University Press.

Dotson, Kristie. 2023. "XIII—Dear Octavia Butler." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 123 (3): 327–346. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoad011.

Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023. "VII—Can Arguments Change Minds?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 123 (3): 173–198. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoad006.

Edmonds, David. 2023. *Parfit: A Philosopher and his Mission to Save Morality*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.111375.

Fine, Sarah. 2022. "Political Philosophy and Autobiography." In *Political Philosophy, Here and Now: Essays in Honour of David Miller*, edited by Daniel Butt, Sarah Fine, and Zofia Stemplowska. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198807834.003.0013.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical And Civill* .

Jannarone, Kimberly, Elise Morrison, and Tavia Nyong'o. 2022. "Presence, 2019–2022: Introduction." *TDR/The Drama Review* 66 (4) 22–27. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000533.

Lee, Stewart. 2011. *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-up Comedian*. Faber & Faber.

McCoy, Marina. 2008. *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497827.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford University Press.

Potkay, Adam. 2017. "Rhetoric and Philosophy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, edited by Michael J. MacDonald. Oxford University Press.

Rainer, Lucia. 2017. *On the Threshold of Knowing: Lectures and Performances in Art and Academia*. Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839438046.

Richards, Jess. 2018. "Performance as Text. Text as Performance: Love Like Salt, a Collaboration between a Writer and an Artist." *Performance Research* 23 (2): 13–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1464721.

Schmidt, Theron, Diana Damian Martin, Mick Douglas, Reza Mirabi, Ellen O'brien, Rajni Shah, Val Smith, Lizzie Thomson, and Julie Vulcan. 2023. "The First Thing We Make Is the Conditions of Our Meeting: A Gathering on Gathering." *Performance Research* 28 (2): 14–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2260691.

Schulz, Kathryn. 2010. *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. Granta.

Seeley, John Robert. (1883) 2010. *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511783159.

Setiya, Kieran. 2021."Can Comedy Change the World?" *New Statesman*, 22 July. https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/agora/2021/07/can-comedy-change-world.

Sharpe, Scott, J-D Dewsbury, and Maria Hynes. "The Minute Interventions of Stewart Lee." *Performance Research* 19 (2): 116–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2014.928527.

Unger, Clio. 2021. "Share Your Work: Lola Arias's Lecture Performance Series and the Artistic Cognitariat of the Global Pandemic." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31 (4): 471–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2021.1976166.

Biography

Sarah Fine is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Philosophy and Fellow of Corpus Christi College at the University of Cambridge. Her work is primarily in social and political philosophy and ethics. She specialises in issues related to migration and borders, well as methodology in philosophy. She is also interested in work connecting philosophy with the arts. She has been involved in a range of research-led collaborations with artists and arts institutions, across a variety of media, including visual arts, theatre, and dance.

This work was funded by The Good Integration project, The Research Council of Norway, 313846.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

NOT ALL LATENESS IS THE SAME

ALEXANDRA BAYBUTT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON
ANNA LEON ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS VIENNA

Abstract

This contribution is a collaboration between a movement and performance practitioner, researcher and educator; and a dance historian. It takes as a starting point the circumstance of 'being late'—to the party, to academia, to a dance class, to oneself, to the opening of a performance curtain, to choreographic trends—to explore how Western dance practices and theoretical discourses about dance perform, reflect and reinforce power-laden concepts and enactments of spacetime. 'Not all lateness is the same' is a dialogue between dance history (conceived as researching, writing, teaching and learning) and dance practice (conceived as learning, doing and watching). There is a how-to for this text, found in the afterword. That is our way of promising that the text has an intention, knows where it is going, will answer your questions. The impatient can go straight there, already reading in a non-linear way that we encourage. A dis/mis-placed how-to is our way of aligning the expectation of going somewhere with a resistance to it. To not say in advance what the text will do is a way of proposing that the text does; that what it does will be done whether one says it in advance or not. If we don't say what we want, hope, or think that will be, the doing will nevertheless be done, by you, and by us, and by the text.

To not say how the text will do what it does is a way of proposing that what the text does cannot unfold without its how. We explore lateness within and leaking out of specific epistemic frameworks that define modes, limits, and values of knowledge production. Our engagement with the notion of lateness probes and pushes these frameworks—as well as the wider capitalist frameworks of production in which they are embedded—considering how dominant Eurocentric,

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):39–57
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101525
ISSN 2057–7176

modernist dance historiography places dance in a linear temporality of periodisation and a centre/periphery spatialisation, thus creating a hierarchical dynamic whereby peripheralised scenes, practices and even peoples are in a constant state of 'lateness' (typified in the 2000s with the expansion of Europe).

The text nevertheless does not clearly state where it will do what it does. This is a way of proposing that the text does, every time it is activated as text, anew. It is a way of not fixing the text in (epistemic) timespace: to not use the text to confirm the existence of a field by claiming it. To not say where the text is doing its work on lateness is to acknowledge that this where might be lost between the where of the writing and the where of the publishing, which are also related through hierarchies of lateness. In an interwoven way, our engagement with lateness confronts dominant modes of practicing and teaching dance in the Western tradition which posit lateness—to the dance lesson, to the beat, to the rhythm of expected progress, to the conformity of a synchronised group—as a flaw, despite improvisational and somatic practices' acknowledgement of, and even desire for, the open-endedness of immanence in the ongoing-ness of doing. Expansions of dance practice, provision (conditions, policies, education, funding, infrastructure) and research, seen for instance through counter arguments to its prohibitive ableism through notions of crip time, have questioned forms of duration but not erased the dominance of setting timeframes of events that define and separate. Investigating these negotiations, we propose that some lateness can be reclaimed in a multitemporal and decentralised epistemic-practical framework.

Glossary

Decentralisation

A deliberate or accidental resituating of something central (e.g. a person, place, culture, value system) or near the centre towards an edge; or an—again deliberate or accidental—horizontalisation that counters the binary of centre/periphery. (For the notion of centre see 'peripheralisation'.) The process results in material changes in terms of access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities, as well as self-perception and judgement from others. To decentralise is to diffuse or to scatter; with it we infer relations between parts that are in motion. A 'centre' (e.g. of power, attention, initiation) may thus arise anywhere and be subject to change, as is the case for what is identifiable *in* that centre; or a centre may not be occupied at all. To decentralise is therefore also to multiply rather than monopolise, an action that results in overlapping, concurrent, and coexisting realms and temporalities of belonging.

Decision

A mental process through which one commits to take action towards change. Decision-making can result from deliberation as well as habit. A decision could be forced, or there could be a long delay in making one. Responsibilities, risk, and factors beyond seemingly individual control affect the grounds on which a decision is made or not made. For example, decisions to change carbon use, develop mitigation, and support physical and social adaptations requires political, (trans)national, and individual action. The lateness of these decisions is already producing unevenly distributed global crises: floods, access to food, water, shelter. When will it be too late, who decides this, and

for whom is it already too late? The profit-driven wish to accumulate that is fundamental to capitalism is generating the crisis of bad decisions, indecision, and forced decision. Decision, indecision, forced decision, timing decision are also parts of choreographic practice, especially score-based, open-ended practice.

Epistemic framework

A context-specific set of assumptions, modes, and methods for thinking and investigating that defines the limits of what is knowable, posits how knowledge can be accessed, and determines criteria for what knowledge is considered valid. Epistemic frameworks are like languages: familiarity and ease—and therefore an investment of time—is required to access them. Multiple epistemic frameworks may coexist within a given context, usually with clearly distinguishable power distributions; i.e. some epistemic frameworks are dominant while others are marginalised or discredited. Revealing epistemic frameworks as such can be a way of challenging their position of power, even if always-already late.

Flaw

A blemish or imperfection, devaluing an object, person or phenomenon. Something that weakens or invalidates. In an individualist-capitalist context, flaws are also often considered as something to counteract or control by the subject having or experiencing them. Unlike the Japanese aesthetic and Buddhist concept of *wabi sabi* that heightens acceptance of transience and imperfection, a flaw is decidedly negative. It is used pejoratively to assert specific hierarchies of value in which any comparison made is based upon a seemingly shared understanding of a fixed set of criteria.

Glossary

An alphabetically organised list of words and their definitions, usually accompanying a text in which these words are used. The glossary has multiple functions: by *selecting* the terms that will be defined, it posits their importance in the text; by giving specifically relevant definitions that would not be the ones available in an encyclopaedic or dictionary entry, it *situates* the terms and therefore the text itself; and by organising its contents alphabetically, it *horizontalizes* them into a web of interrelated discursive choices. The glossary mediates between reader and text, *explaining* the text's intentions in using certain terms but also allowing the terms to be used outside of their placement in the text. The glossary is a form of paratext. Rather than leaning on explicit references, our glossary entries reflect 15+ years of reading, research, and work, so as to foreground current definitions necessary for approaching this particular collection of scores. In this way, this glossary acknowledges that it cannot be definitive, as that would foreclose conceptual experimentation, semantic shifts and open-ended (un)learning.

Historiography

Our understanding of the ways in which we do—or practice—history; that is, different ways of understanding and narrating the past in relation to the present (including the understanding of 'the past' as 'what has come before' and 'the present' as 'now' in a more or less linear order). Historiography describes different ways of doing history, identifies their epistemic frameworks, and theorises about how different ways of doing history result in different anchorings in different

presents. In doing so, historiography can point to how specific presents are *rendered possible* by specific historical narratives; and how alternative, plural historical narratives could ground alternative ways of living the present.

Knowledge production (processes)

Prevailing questions, disciplinary conventions, extant research paradigms, reading, methods, and ethics coalesce into a research methodology that defines an ontological (research object) and epistemic (the knowledge it holds) position, and you as researcher within that. This framework is itself an example of knowledge production in its composition, alongside what that methodology enables to be framed, generated, argued, and contested. Modes of knowledge production themselves entail a politics of positions, identities, institutions, and capital. More than only individual knowledge, knowledge production relies upon the socially contingent nature of enhancing or repressing the capacity to act with and through knowledge, making knowledge sharing diverse and open-ended or not.

Modernity

In dominant Western/globalised academic and more precisely historiographic discourse, a period (usually roughly ranging from the 16th to the mid-20th century, but varying, as for instance 'dance modernity' frequently refers to dance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries) as well as an understanding of the experience of that period as such: in other words, a specific experiential mode of inscription in time. Modernity is a Eurocentric concept, reflecting the epistemic dominance of Western Europe in defining temporality. Because of this dominance, a Western European relationship with time intervenes in non-Western-European experiences of time, peripheralizing alternative periodisations and temporal understandings. Everyday, common understandings of 'modern' are influenced by—although not identical with—the classificatory work of the academic notion of modernity.

Open-endedness

A conception of life as emergent; not theorised as predetermined (teleological) or involving an elsewhere to eventually get or escape to (transcendence). Certitude is open to question, as conclusions are often temporary. Life, research, knowledge are ongoing in correspondence, part of multiple folds and available to different ways of telling themselves or being told. Even with endings and beginnings, open-endedness would not totalise or close off with singularity. For in the movement of open-endedness we find no map of supremacy, but rather an invitation to continue: a debate, the potentials of subjectification and becoming, and maybe even democratic practices through new possibilities of inclusion. In this perspective, open-endedness distributes and multiplies (political, epistemic) agency by refusing that outcomes, or conclusions are ever entirely foregone.

Organisation of time and space

There is the physics of time and space that humans do not control, like the spinning of the earth on its slightly changing axis as it rotates around the sun. Then there are all the efforts made by governments, corporations, businesses, discourses, to measure, predict, understand space and

time by creating methods for perceiving duration, direction, velocity, and force through their effects. These are processes of knowledge production and of forming epistemic frameworks around temporality and spatiality. These efforts may attempt to quantify or privilege discrete elements, but also compose them; so a sequencing of spaces and times itself produces effects such as making normal, making dramatic, making machines, making art.

Paratext

Text that appears alongside another text, within a convention positing the former as secondary to the latter; this is usually reflected in that the accompanying text is fragmentary while the accompanied text has a more uninterrupted flow. While a paratext is often considered secondary to a 'main' text, a paratext—like a glossary—transforms the reading of the 'main' text by elaborating (unfolding, unpacking) and situating it in specific ways. This occurs through references to other texts as well as non-textual elements (like performance works). The paratext provides a network of references around the 'main' text but does not explain how the text is related to these references. We derive our paratexts from our situated, subjective archives and references. We do not follow a citational practice of agreement (i.e. we do not agree with the content of all our references, and sometimes formulate our thoughts in counteraction to them) nor reduce discourses to individual authors.

Periodisation

The historiographic decision and act of dividing the past into discrete (albeit at times overlapping) periods. When periodising, historians attempt to *describe* historical shifts, distinguishing one era from another. Their perception of these shifts depends on their epistemic framework; the resulting periodisation therefore reflects and reinforces the epistemic framework in which it was defined. Through periodising, historiography creates specific narratives of the past and specific conceptual tools for understanding it. In modernist historiography, the end of a period might be announced by agents proclaiming to embody the advent of the next in a linear temporality where a rupture with the past becomes a precondition for the future to come. The linear time of modernist historiography was construed in a Eurocentric manner, whereby narratives of forwardness and backwardness, winners and losers, progress and decline or primitivism became grounds for racialisation. In this way, periodisation has also served as a violent means of controlling narratives, attributing differential degrees of agency, and erasing the relevance of peripheralised groups.

Peripheralisation

To be pushed to the side, to the edge, to a less-than, semi-relevant, or irrelevant status by a variety of forces and processes of power. Naming a hotspot that aligns place with activity enables comparisons between concentrations of energy to help focus attention and stratify where resources could be further added. Doing this makes other places peripheral. Unlike decentralisation, the effects of peripheralization on ideas, concepts, modes of production, processes, and people can be disempowering. While peripheralisation is a spatial concept, its processual impacts are also temporal: being pushed into irrelevance might also entail exclusion from shared temporality, both in the form of the inability to participate in dominant temporal experience and in the sidelining of the sense of time of those deemed irrelevant. However, as the

history of the *avant garde* indicates, a periphery can eventually become a new core as what was once less well-known or marginal (e.g. Surrealism) can gain in popularity or ubiquity, even becoming canonical. This can, and often does, involve appropriation.

Practice

The noun practice, *a* practice, not its verb friend *to* practise, means the application or use of an idea. A practice inherently involves duration, maybe repetition, and more often than not, movement. It is often developed to be habitual with specific procedural elements that are discernible to the one doing it or observing it. Sometimes it is fun or necessary to change a practice. Sometimes it takes a lot of effort to retain a practice. Asking what someone does (alone, with others, with tools, with attention etc) is to ask about what their practice is. The answer, e.g. a practice of; a practice for; has somewhere in it an idea about that practice.

Schedule

A plan of events or tasks for a specific period of time, like a day. The decisions made by a schedule determine the organisation of people and resources in space and time and rely on coordination with other matrixes of decisions, like a calendar year and days of the week. Being able to predict a start and end, or arrival and departure, was accelerated by mechanisation and industrialisation to generate mobility between spaces and places or the fixing of an event duration. For groups to participate in a shared event, a schedule acts as a shared contract to make it possible to travel together. To travel together is not always possible.

Score

A set of instructions, propositions, or invitations to do something, like a performance. Scores as instructions for producing music date back to at least 1400 BCE. Scores can be made with spoken or written words or graphic design of words, lines, and images, and may use pre-existing music or movement notation or one's own inventions for communication. Scores can be very precise, whether elaborately detailed or minimal. They can be very open to interpretation or less so. Scores and scoring are used by dancers and choreographers to inform performances or record elements of them (for later transmission or even exhibition). They help with thinking about features, qualities, intensities, habits considered essential and their rupture. The scores in this text are intended to be significant through their doing rather than them being observed. They therefore propose dance practice as a self-reflexive process of knowledge production, rather than as event or object to be watched.

Self-reflexivity

Or reflexivity, is an ethical imperative in research and artistic creation. It involves examining one's own assumptions, beliefs, and judgement systems, as these influence research questions, methods and processes. Self-reflexivity confronts and questions who we are as researchers or artists, and how this positionality guides us and our relationships with other people or things. Self-reflexivity helps to account for, if not make full sense of, emergent affects and responsibilities in undergoing research that invariably impacts upon ourselves and others. One's unique positionalities and multiple overlapping aspects of identity effect every step of research and/or

artistic design and process. Self-reflexivity can enable increased awareness or acknowledgement of structural positions and power dynamics that are more or less explicit in each context when thought about relationally. Whilst these dynamics shift from place to place and based upon who is present, one's situated position often informs decisions to do, act, embody something—or not. A researcher attempts, in moments of self-reflexivity, to understand the perspectives and positions of others as such, even if not to embody, perform or inhabit them as an actor might.

Slowness

A quality that can describe a motion, be it physical or metaphorical. As an indicator of reduced or minimal speed, slowness requires a (potentially implicit but nonetheless intersubjectively shared) sense of standard or neutral pace. As such, slowness is dependent on a—be it physical or metaphorical—normative temporalisation of motion. As a critical reaction to this normative temporalisation, slowing down can be associated with sustainability, empowerment, indulgence, or even pleasure. Nevertheless, by being situated within a normative temporal value system, slowness also reveals its dependence on privilege, such as financial resources, ability, or temporal abundance. Similarly, in some cases slowness might be necessary—stemming from illness, disability, neurodivergence, fatigue—but it is no less resistant for its necessity. Within a normative temporal value system, slowness is also a marker and maker of lateness.

Theory

A set of practices engaging with generating, developing, challenging, understanding, modifying, critiquing concepts, as mental constructs through which the world can be understood. The main medium of theory is discourse, i.e. situated, context-specific, and power-imbued language. In its modes of thinking, its concepts, and its discourse, theory is bound to epistemic frameworks; but one of (critical) theory's main goals is to question epistemic frameworks, including its own, and reveal their impacts.

Time

A dimension in which life unfolds. Time is a sensed parameter of our existence as living beings that underlines the finitude of our being. Time is also notoriously hard to grasp and conceptualise. It is perhaps as a result that temporality is more vulnerable to being defined through epistemically dominant discourses: a Christian-dominated model of the nation state has imposed the structuring of time into weeks, and the pause of activity on Sunday; a capitalist-dominated model of work and productivity has imposed a counting of time and its effective use, turning even leisure time into something that can be 'saved'; a medically-dominated model of age has imposed an understanding of life as a series of phases, some of which—especially for people read as women—are tacitly understood to be periods of decline; an ableist model of activity has imposed a homogeneised temporal pace that functions as a physical and mental barrier for many. In a highly controlled timescape, those who are late face consequences limiting their capacity to pursue a good life and opportunities for participation in the community. Choreographic keeping of time can reflect and reinforce, or counter and trouble, dominant ways of inscribing bodies in time.

Lateness Scores with Paratexts

To perform this score, you need to want to go and attend a dance performance.

Find out the date and time of a performance you want to attend.

Figure out how long it would take you to go there on foot or with your mobility aid.

Stop what you are doing in good time so you would not be late to attend the performance and go there on foot or with your mobility aid.

Paratext

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity.* Polity.

Filliou, Robert. 1970. *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts.* Verlag Gebr.

Finer, Jem. 1999–ongoing. *Longplayer*. https://longplayer.org/.

Groys, Boris. 2002. "The Loneliness of the Project." *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory* 1 (1).

Hauswedell, Tessa, Axel Körner, and Ulrich Tiedau. 2019. *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in Europe and Global Contexts.* UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787350991.

Hoghe, Raimund. 2016. *La Valse*. http://www.raimundhoghe.com/maximized/lavalse.html.

Kenyon, Simone. 2020. *Into the Mountain*. https://www.intothemountain.co.uk/.

Kunst, Bojana. 2004. "The Politics of Affection and Uneasiness." *Art Margins.* https://artmargins.com/politics-of-affection-and-uneasiness/.

Marcalo, Rita. 2019. *One Last Dance—An Chéad Damh*. https://onelastdance-ancheaddamhsa.tumblr.com/.

da Piacenza, Domenico. [ca 1425] 1995. *De Arte Saltandi Et Choreas Ducendi*. Translated by A. William Smith. In *Fifteenth-Century Dance and Music: Twelve Transcribed Italian Treatises and Collections in the Tradition of Domenico da Piacenza*, edited by A. William Smith, 10–67. Pendragon Press.

Stengele, Julischka. 2020. *Ballast I Existenz*. https://julischka.eu/ballast-%7C-existenz-1.

Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities.* Polity.

Wilkie, Fiona. 2015. *Performance, Transport and Mobility: Making Passage.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137476890.

(Decision; Modernity; Organisation of time and space; Peripheralisation; Schedule; Self-reflexivity; Slowness; Time)

To perform this score, you need at least four people, pens and paper.

Divide the participants into two sub-groups (A & B) along an arbitrary criterion: for instance, by birthdate or height. Each sub-group should have at least two people.

The members of each group discuss among themselves and decide on a dance-related topic they are interested in. They collect their ideas why this topic is important, what their main views on it are, what more they would like to learn about it etc., into a short document of about a page or two.

Group A moves on to another spot in the space and discusses how their selected topic can give rise to a new one. For example, if their first focus was stillness, maybe they decide to pursue soundlessness as a derivative. They create a document on the new theme.

Group B, in the meantime, visits Group A's first working spot and reads their initial document (in this example, the one about stillness). Group B members discuss the ideas in the document and their own views on the topic. They make a new document, which combines their ideas with those of Group A.

When their task is done, the groups continue in the same way to new stations, i.e. Group A continues to produce new documents on new themes while Group B follows the trail. If Group A is not inspired, they can revisit any of the previous stations (including Group B's first document and all documents reworked by Group B) to find inspiration. Each group moves on when their task is done without waiting for the other group to finish.

Paratext

Asentić, Saša, and Ana Vujanović. 2008. "My Private Bio-Politics A Performance on a Paper Floor." *Performance Research* 13 (1): 70–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160802465573.

Beggan James K., and Allison Scott Pruitt. 2013. "Leading, Following and Sexism in Social Dance: Change of Meaning as Contained Secondary Adjustments." *Leisure Studies* 33 (5): 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2013.833281.

Brown, Trisha. 1971. *Roof Piece*. https://trishabrowncompany.org/repertory/roof-piece.html.

Burt, Ramsay. 2004. "Undoing Postmodern Dance History." *Sarma*. http://sarma.be/docs/767.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1992. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928652.

Dharwadker, Aparna. 2010. "Representing India's Pasts: Time, Culture and the Problems of Performance Historiography." In *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, edited by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait. University of Iowa Press.

El-Tayeb, Fatima. 2011. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816670154.001.0001.

Isou, Isidore. 1965. *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*. Roberto Altmann.

Shunt collective, 2005–6. *Amato Saltone*. https://www.shunt.co.uk/amatosaltone.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. 1991. *Cotton and Iron.* In *When The Moon Waxes Red*, 11–28. Routledge.

Vevar, Rok. 2018. *Dan, noč + človek = Ritem: Antologija slovenske sodobnoplesne publicistike 1918–1960* [Day, night + man = Rhythm: An Anthology of Contemporary Slovene Journalism 1918–1960]. Maska.

Vujanović, Ana. 2008. "Tiger's Leap: A Method of Reloading the History of Local Scenes." https://www.anaVujanovic.net/2012/03/tigers-leap-a-method-of-reloading-the-history-of-local-scenes/.

(Decision; Epistemic framework; Historiography; Knowledge production; Modernity; Periodisation; Peripheralisation; Theory)

To perform this score, you need a group of people and someone observing the adherence to the original procedure.

Materials required:

A gym or yard with clearly marked edges 20m apart

The recording of the beeps (see www.topendsports.com/testing/tests/20mshuttle.htm)

As many copies of Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism *as you can find*

Cloth bags (big enough to carry in your arms), one with soil, one with chalk dust, one with sugar, one with grain, one with tea (these can be dried tea leaves or those collected from already-steeped tea)

Beep test procedure: *the 'beep test' is a fitness test of the aerobic energy system*

This test involves continuous running/rolling between two lines 20m apart, in time to recorded beeps. The participants stand behind one of the lines facing the second line, and begin running when instructed by the recording. The speed at the start is quite slow. You continue running between the two lines, turning when signalled by the recorded beeps. After about one minute, a sound indicates an increase in speed, and the beeps will be closer together. This continues each minute (level). If the line is reached before the beep sounds, you must wait until the beep sounds before continuing. If the line is not reached before the beep sounds, you are given a warning and must continue to run/travel to the line, then turn and try to catch up with the pace within two more 'beeps'. You are given a warning the first time you fail to reach the line (within 2 meters), and eliminated after the second warning.

Someone needs to be nominated or self-nominate to observe the players and give the warnings.

Additions to the original procedure:

Addition 1

When someone gives you the second warning to leave the beep test running, take a copy from the side of the space and start reading aloud Hannah Arendt's words from chapter 9 *The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man* from part 2 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* until the end of the score's activation. You can choose wherever you wish to be in the space.

OR

Addition 2

When someone gives you a warning, or before then if you are tired/bored/had enough of running/rolling, or didn't even want to or couldn't, go pick up a bag from the side of the space. Then start circling the whole event space on the periphery using whatever steps/movements you would like to use that reflect the mood you are in. As you travel, scatter the contents of the bag into the space whenever you wish.

OR

Addition 3

When someone gives you a warning, go up to them, stare them in the eyes, and start shouting BEEP BEEP BEEP at them. They can choose to stand still, join the reading, join the encircling or carry on observing the remaining runners and giving warnings. Your shouting of 'BEEP' can become singing, whispering, speaking.

The beep test finishes when no one is left running and everyone is alternatively occupied.

Paratext

Chen, Mel Y., Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich, eds. 2023. *Crip Genealogies*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478023852.

Cvejić, Bojana. 2015. *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437396_1.

Gordon, Avery F. 2018. *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*. Fordham University Press.

Helguera, Pablo. 2010. "Alternative Time and Instant Audience." http://pablohelguera.net/2013/02/alternative-time-and-instant-audience-2010/.

Jeffrey, Ellen. 2024. *The After-Hours: Labour and Repetition in (Un)conscious Bodies*. Lecture-performance.

Lefebvre, Henri. (1992) 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life.* Continuum.

Lepecki, André. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. Routledge.

Louis XIV. 1663. *Lettres patentes du roy, pour l'établissement de l'Académie royale de danse en la ville de Paris*. Le Petit.

Maslin, Mark. 2021. *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

McCarren, Felicia. 2003. *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Stanford University Press.

Price, Margaret. 2017. "Moving Together: Toward a Theory of Crip Spacetime." https://www.margaretprice.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/smith-talk-4-17-17.docx.

Schmalisch, Romana. 2013. "The Choreography of Labour." In *Notes sur les mouvements* 1, 2–5. Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. https://leslaboratoires.org/article/journal-notes-sur-les-mouvements/la-choregraphie-du-travail.

Schwarz, Hillel. 1992. "Torque. The New Kinesthetic of the Twentieth Century." In *Incorporations*, edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 71–127. Zone Books.

Sloterdijk, Peter. 1989. *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*. Suhrkamp.

Wilding, Faith. 1972. *Waiting*. https://vimeo.com/401283742.

(Decision; Flaw; Decentralisation; Modernity; Open-endedness; Organisation of time and space; Practice; Self-reflexivity; Slowness; Time)

To perform this score, you need to be the teacher of a public dance class.

Someone has entered your class after it has already started.

Do you:

a) Ignore them
b) Ignore them until you can reasonably include them
c) Acknowledge them c1) with friendliness c2) with hostility c3) physically (e.g. gesture)
d) Acknowledge them and give alternative instructions
e) Acknowledge them and ask the group to recap the class so far
f) Some combination of the above
g) Something else

No one is late.

Do you:

a) Take it for granted
b) Thank everyone for being on time
c) Remind everyone of the start time for the next class
d) A combination of the above
e) Something else

Paratext:

Ansell-Pearson, Keith. 2018. "Bergson on Education and the Art of Life." In *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition,* 153–172. Bloomsbury.

Barr, Sherrie. 2020. "Embodying One's Teaching Identity – Making the Tacit Explicit." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 11 (4): 454–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1673473.

Bottlefed. 2009. Hold Me Until You Break. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEEz8RoXx7w.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. 2004. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767149.

Hage, Ghassan, ed. 2009. *Waiting*. Melbourne University Press.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.

Jaques-Dalcroze, Emile. 1921. *Rhythm, Music and Education.* G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Müller, Ivana. 2006. *While we were holding it together*. https://vimeo.com/235764472.

Ravaisson, Félix. (1838) 2008. *Of Habit.* Continuum.

(Decision; Epistemic framework; Knowledge production; Modernity; Open-endedness; Organisation of space and time; Peripheralisation; Practice; Schedule; Self-reflexivity)

To perform this score you need two people, each with their dance history books/references. Alternatively, you can meet in a library with a dance history section, as long as it covers the two people's research interests. Each person's research should focus on a different time/place.

Person (a): Look at your dance history books/references. Choose one and find the first periodisation it proposes; for example, the book might concern dance in 'the interwar years'. (How) is the periodisation defined and justified?

Person (b): Look at your dance history books/references. Choose one and find the first spatialisation it proposes; for example, the book might concern dance in Flanders. (How) is the spatialisation defined and justified?

Both people together: Cross person (a)'s periodisation with person (b)'s spatialisation. In this example, look at Flemish (dance) history in the years defined as the interwar period. (How) does this spacetime make sense? (How) does it not make sense?

Repeat with other examples.

Paratext

Burt, Ramsay, and Michael Huxley. 2020. *Dance, Modernism and Modernity*. Routledge.

Koselleck, Reinhart. (1985) 2004 [1985]. "Representation, Event, and Structure." In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, 105–114. Columbia University Press.

Kwan, SanSan. 2017. "When is Contemporary Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* 49 (3): 38–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767717000341.

Mao, Douglas, and Rebecca Walkowitz. 2008. "The New Modernist Studies." *PMLA* 123 (3): 737–748. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.3.737.

Massey, Doreen. 2005. "Making and Contesting Space-Times." In *For Space: A Relational Politics of the Spatial*, 177–195. Sage

Mignolo, Walter D., and Madina V. Tlostanova. 2006. "Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge." *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2): 205–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063333.

Ram, Harsha. 2016. "The Scale of Global Modernisms: Imperial, National, Regional, Local." *PMLA* 135 (5): 1372–1385. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1372.

Shohat, Ella. 2006. *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*. Duke University Press.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements.* Duke University Press.

Stanford Friedman, Susan. 2010. "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies." *Modernism/Modernity* 17 (3): 471–499. https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2010.0003.

Vujanović, Ana, and Marta Popivoda. 2018. *National Reconciliation: Freedom Landscapes*. Performance-installation and film. https://mladinsko.com/en/program/31/national-reconciliation-freedom-landscapes/.

(Epistemic framework; Historiography; Knowledge production; Modernity; Periodisation; Peripheralisation; Theory)

To perform this score you need at least two people and all the materials that you usually use when working on/with/in dance. You should perform the first part of this score on your own, but if your usual dance work regularly involves other people, try to find a place where they are present (e.g. a corner in a studio where other people are rehearsing).

Part 1, each person separately:

Create an environment that brings together as many of the elements that make up your dance-related work as possible: sit in the studio where you practice; set out photographs of your workshops or performances; open the relevant folders on your computer; collect your notes and books…

Once your environment is ready, close your eyes and think of a party that you have attended (it can be a party you organised or were invited to), in any period in your life. Think about your relationship with time in this party: did you arrive (too) early? Did you arrive (too) late?

Did you leave (too) early or (too) late? Was time passing too fast or too slowly? Did time feel suspended? Did you feel in-synch with other people's time?

Take a blank sheet of paper and set a timer for 20 minutes. Start writing anything that comes to your mind in relation to the above questions. Follow free associations and do not censor or try to organise your thoughts.

Take a break and change environment. Come back and read your text. Then look at the dance environment surrounding you for as long as you need.

Part 2, all together:

Each person reads their text out loud *or* people exchange texts and read each other's texts silently. After you have heard/read another person's text, look at your own dance environment for as long as you need.

Paratext:

Abbing, Hans. 2014. "Notes on the Exploitation of Poor Artists." In *Joy Forever: The Political Economy of Social Creativity*, edited by Michał Kozłowski, Agnieszka Kurant, Jan Sowa, Krystian Szadkowski, and Jakub Szreder. May Fly Books.

Ballard, J.G. 1996. *Cocaine Nights*. Flamingo.

Bel, Jérôme. 2004. *Veronique Doisneau*. https://www.jeromebel.fr/index.php?p=2&s=8&ctid=1.

Berardi, Franco 'Bifo'. 2011. *After the Future*. AK Press.

Berman, Marshall. 1982. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Verso.

Châtelet, Gilles. (1998) 2014. *To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*. Urbanomic/Sequence Press.

Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books.

McCaffery, Larry, and David Foster Wallace. 1993. "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace." https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/2013/08/02/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/ .

McCormack, Dereck P. 2008. "Thinking-Spaces for Research Creation." *Inflexions* 1. https://www.inflexions.org/n1_mccormackhtml.html.

Meseguer Zafe, Raquel, 2017–ongoing. *Restful City*. https://uncharteredcollective.com/.

Rosenblit, Jen. 2023. *ElseWhere Rhapsody*. https://www.jenrosenblit.net/selected-works-.

Ross, David James. 2010. "History of the Artybollocks Generator." https://www.artybollocks.com/history.html.

Stewart, Charles. 2017. "Uncanny History. Temporal Topology in the Post-Ottoman World." *Social Analysis* 61 (1): 129–142.

(Epistemic framework; Modernity; Organisation of time and space; Practice; Self-reflexivity; Theory)

To perform this score, you need two people and quite a lot of space between them.

It can take place outside a public building like the Home Office, an Embassy, a concert hall.

Materials required: *A visa or residency application (either yours, one from someone you know, or find a template from your government's website or office)*

Person (a) stands as if sitting on a horse. Pick from the many examples of statues of men on horses littering town and city public squares. Make sure the chest is puffed, the gaze is steely. Adopt the breath of what you think a self-proclaimed hero on a horse breathes like. Hold.

Person (b) stands far away but faces the other person. Holding a visa or residency application, they perform an '*allongé*' action from Ballet with a capital B. This is an elongated posture, standing on one leg, the other extended behind you, with one arm reaching forward. No experience of Ballet is required to perform this action. The emphasis is on making the extending last as long as possible, so take your time, maybe even wait.

Allongé until you can no longer *allongé*. Then call 'pass'. Drop the paper to the floor, jump on it three times as if it was on fire and you're stamping it out*, then run to where person (a) is. Take up the posture.

When person (a) hears 'pass', fall to the floor and rebound 3 times. Then run to where person (b) was. Take up the posture.

Swap for a minimum of three times.

On the last run to swap places, after jumping on or by the visa/residency application, pick it up again and take it with you. Pause midway, say 'pass' to each other as kindly as you can. If the visa/residency application belongs to you, keep it. If not, pass it to the other person. Then walk away back into your day. Don't re-meet to talk about the score.

*if you are worried about jumping on your real visa in case of damage, jump next to it as if there is a fire around it that you are putting out.

Paratext:

Ahmed, Sara. 1999. "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (3): 329–347. https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303.

de Benserade, Isaac. 1653. *Ballet royal de la Nuit, divisé en quatre Parties ou quatre Veilles, et dansé par Sa Majesté le 23 février 1653*. Robert Ballard.

Bruguera, Tania. 2010. *Surplus Value*. https://taniabruguera.com/surplus-value/.

Elias, Norbert. (1969) 1985. *La Société de cour*. Translated by Pierre Kamnitzer and Jeanne Etoré. Flammarion.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914." In *The Invention of Tradition*, 263–308. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636.007.

Kundnani, Arun. 2007. "Migration and the Market-state." In *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain,* 141–152. Pluto.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. (2009) 2017. *Experimental Politics: Work, Welfare, and Creativity in the Neoliberal Age*. MIT Press.

Rabinow, Paul. 2008. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary.* Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827992.

Robinson, Cedric J. 1983. *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.

Scott, David, and Sylvia Wynter. 2000. "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter." *Small Axe* 8: 119–207.

Shawcross, Conrad. 2009. *Chord*. https://conradshawcross.com/blog/project/chord-2009/.

Stanger, Arabella. 2021. *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance*. Northwestern University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1wd02q7.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolf. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon.

Wikipedia. n.d., "List of equestrian statues by country." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_equestrian_statues.

(Epistemic framework; Historiography; Modernity; Organisation of time and space; Practice; Schedule; Self-reflexivity; Slowness; Time)

Afterword, or: how to use this text

You can read this text in multiple temporalities, entering and exiting at different points. While it has an underlying dramaturgical logic, its fragmentary construction will result in your experiencing and understanding different texts in every entry.

You can read our glossary as a conceptual guidebook to the scores, following the glossary entries tagged under each score. You can read our glossary as a situated snapshot into a set of mobile understandings, asking yourself (again and again at different points in time) what your glossaries might be. You can read our glossary as an argument about lateness, peripheralisation, and a reclaiming of temporal margins.

You can read our scores as written prompts for action: as an invitation to try out and see how they unfold unpredictably in their being done. You can read our scores as translations of arguments into open-ended proposals for action—and therefore as proposals for how practice engages with concepts and theory is a set of practices. In this case, the scores are scripts for enactment or for

vicarious rehearsal of enactment possibilities; they invite their potential users to de-centre lateness away from its association with a flawed condition. You can read our scores as digested, processed, enacted manifestations of the discursive and performative knowledges that reside within us.

You can read our paratext as a way to situate our scores, asking yourself (again and again at different points in time) what your paratexts might be. You can read our paratext as a reference list. You can read our paratext as a framing of our glossary: the paratext includes references, the glossary does not; the scores/actions mediating between them haunt the ways in which our digested references (paratext) are exteriorised in our definitions and perspectives (glossary).

This text is fundamentally open-ended and does not presume any singular conclusion or learning outcome in a teleological manner. It is anchored in ideas of non-systematic understanding and assumes that reading, acting and understanding by scholars, educators, and artists operate interrelatedly but also at different temporalities that might require different availabilities of time.

Introductions are tempting both to read and to write. They perform a lot of work; they might even overcome the shortcomings of the text they guide into. Introductions are also tempting to read and write because they have been, and still are, epistemic battlegrounds: they are the places where we—more often 'we' if marginalised, more often 'we' if activist, more often 'we' if working in embodied ways—get to say *I am expected to do this like this, but I will not do it like this because I don't want to confirm this epistemology.* Introductions-as-epistemic-battlegrounds are the price to pay for subversions of epistemology elsewhere: you can do this, as long as you tell us beforehand what, how, and why you will do it.

It is perhaps one of the major wins of the introduction-as-epistemic-battleground that in Western-academic epistemology (that does not mean only Western universities, or even only universities) it is now expected to include, in this leading- or guiding-into a text, not only where that text is situated (in this or that epistemic field) but from where the text is written: what positionality it stems from. To resist the explicitness of positionality—to not say from where the text is written—is risky: it can deny that positionality matters, that previous wins matter, that where a text is written from impacts the knowable and the known that it communicates. But it can also mean to acknowledge that positionality, the knowable and the known shift, and that these shifts are often too granular to grasp through identity or context contours; to acknowledge that where the text is written from does not account for the diversity and beautiful incoherence of what it has digested and what speaks through it. It can also mean embracing the complexity of nuanced positions, where oppression and marginalisation coexist with privilege and dominance; as it can mean resisting the urge to make positionality overt as a prerequisite to speak. We insist performance philosophy, as a broad leaky field irrigating and irrigated by ongoing epistemic contestations, can hold such contradictions. When you come out of this text, you might not know precisely where we stand (when we wrote the text, or when we rewrote it, or when you read it) but you will know approximately where we stand (when we wrote the text, or when we rewrote it, or when you read it), this approximation being our—and your—capacity to learn, or our—and your—de facto inscription in time as change, or both, or both and more.

Acknowledgements

We thank Kinga Szemessy, Kirstin Smith, and Lucy Tyler for providing valuable feedback to early drafts of this article.

This research was funded in part by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [T1336-G]. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Biographies

Alexandra Baybutt works a lecturer in performance practice at University College London; somatic movement educator on modular programmes of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System for WholeMovement; and artist. Her research interests concern space: cellular, social, political. Recent works include *Contemporary Dance Festivals in the Former Yugoslav Space: (in)dependent scenes* (Routledge 2023) and *Equity in Working Conditions in Dance* (European Dance Development Network 2023).

Anna Leon is a researcher and curator based in Vienna. She is postdoctoral fellow at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, working at the intersection of dance history, cultural history, critical theory and aesthetics. Her curatorial projects are situated between discursive, theoretical and performative practices and include the theory programme of Tanzquartier Wien (2022–2025), the Salzburg-based (artistic) research platform tanzbuero (with Gwendolin Lehnerer, Lisa Hinterreithner, and Dominik Jellen), *Radio (non-)conference* (with Netta Weiser) and *Choreography+* (with Johanna Hilari). https://annaleon.net/

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

PERFORMATIVE UTOPIAS: MAKING SPACE, TAKING TIME, DOING DIFFERENTLY?

TEEMU PAAVOLAINEN TAMPERE UNIVERSITY

The global rise of fascist politics, war and genocide, parts of the planet becoming uninhabitable due to global heating: this is the most urgent background against which many artists and scholars feel newly obliged to train their more utopian imaginations. In the derogatory vernacular of passive daydreaming, it might appear that there is precisely no place for utopia in such a dystopian reality—and in the later twentieth century, the idea was largely denigrated as impossible. Whether blamed on naïveté or fanaticism, the outcome seemed inevitably oppressive and totalitarian, or then just a failure in scale, longevity, and 'realism,' against 'human nature': a no-go, much as Thomas More's 1516 coinage combines the 'good place' (*eutopia*) with 'no place' (*outopia*).

In the current climate of disillusionment and cynical resignation, however—the alternatives often reduced to plain survival or extinction—the concept has become topical once more, covering not only literary fiction but a wide variety of social theory (feminist, anarchist, sociological) and, crucially, cultural practices (for overviews of the field, see Levitas [1990] 2010 and Lakkala 2021). Rather than the static blueprint of old, forcefully imposed or forever deferred, today's utopian revivalists address their utopias as *real*, *critical*, *minor*, *grounded*, *lived*, *immanent*, *practical*, or *sustainable* (e.g. Wright 2010; Firth 2012; Allen 2022). Not just a goal, utopia is identified as a "key political skill" or a "method for fostering political imagination" (Eskelinen 2020, 4, 9). Crucially, then, I argue it should also be understood as a matter of performance, as in *doing differently*.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025): 58–70
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101530
ISSN 2057-7176

Performance, for its part, has long been aligned with radical critique, defined by 'efficacy' not entertainment, and extended across the 'broad spectrum' of social conduct (Schechner [2002] 2013). Against such ideals, however, most Performance Studies work seems securely framed by aesthetic, and specifically theatrical practice—this is also the case with Jill Dolan's (2005) commendable *Utopia in Performance*, premised on "evanescence" rather than sustainability, and on the "activism" of "getting more … people into the theater" so they too could experience the affective power of its 'utopian performatives' (8, 170). In switching the polarity to *performative utopias*, then—in this theoretical essay and the larger project it serves to initiate—I merely wish to signal a wider focus on cultural performance and performativity (cf. Muñoz [2009] 2019; Bowditch and Vissicaro 2017), not in the sense of representing let alone feigning, but as *bringing something into being*, in the more social-scientific idiom of creating or affecting real-world states of affairs.

And yet, theory aside, in common parlance the notion of performance shares much the same fate with utopias. Either it is ignored as unreal or otherwise less important—as when 'performative activism' is casually ridiculed as mere theatrical posturing (cf. Paavolainen 2023)—or then the most widespread usage of both concepts, be it in terms of techno-utopias or 'performance metrics,' is fully in line with business as usual. Here, though, if indeed there is a shared prejudice pitting utopia and performance against some allegedly more real kind of realism (as "just a utopia" or "only performative"), this very bias suggests two general premises and a conceptual strategy for this essay.

Premise 1: reality as performative, utopia as made-utopian?

First of all, it could very well be argued that the kinds of 'reality' which repeatedly deem any 'alternatives' impossible are themselves utterly utopian and performative: not a matter of how things just 'are' but of how they are *made* to be, from a specific point of interest. Granted, their utopian benefits fall on a very limited group of people, who also happen to control large machineries of violence, money, media, and identity—and indeed, these latter do define one very performative kind of 'realism': the "political ontology of violence," in anthropologist David Graeber's (2011) blunt term, whereby "the very parameters of social existence and common sense" are reproduced by force (46). Even more powerfully, this common sense is constantly reproduced in a global, corporate media space in which any positively utopian aspirations are regularly presented as if they were an already achieved dystopia: a fake reality if ever these was one, against which more authoritarian utopias take seed and which they will conveniently keep on blaming for their own broken promises (yes, I am thinking of Trump 2.0 here).

Conversely, if we go by this proposal that common-sense 'reality' is largely aligned with the utopias of those in a position to make their utopias real and to deny their performative basis, then arguably, the alleged 'impossibility' of utopia, too—in the standard derogatory sense—is a function of its being *made impossible* in that reality.

Often, political alternatives are rendered impossible simply by burdening them with impossible demands. Even as almost everything now seems acceptable as 'reality,' utopia, like fiction, has the high responsibility of being somehow more believable: for all the critique of utopias imposing

'blueprints' on unsuspecting victims, precise blueprints are what their proponents should provide, lest they be discarded as 'mere utopias.' Not least, this biased burden of proof sows division within progressive social movements and social theory. Whatever the temporal horizon, a default range of criticisms is easily amassed on any utopian aspirations: If you look for inspiration in the past, you will be deemed nostalgic or romantic, seeking the impossibility of reversing 'progress'; if you locate seeds of 'real utopias' in the present, you are giving in to the current system—nay, actually reproducing it ad infinitum; if you trust the future to open unforeseen possibilities, you are just utopian or perhaps suspiciously entrepreneurial, in the sense of reproducing the capitalist cult of newness and innovation, expecting sheer profit in return.

Premise 2: the necessity of utopia and the benefits of a performative framing

The other proposition is that this 'anti-utopian prejudice' is so aggressively being boosted for a reason. While it does threaten the powers that be, the utopian 'other world,' possible or not, is quickly becoming imperative, at least for the vast majorities for whom the currently dominant reality has long since outlived its utopian credentials. If human societies remain—or better, are kept—incapable of relating to the rest of the biosphere differently, fully unknown other worlds will wash them over as the current order reaches its tipping points (climate chaos as the final failure of a foregone utopia). These being the odds, it might be advisable to start defining our shared social reality not only by the forces that are so efficient at destroying it, but also, and more importantly, by those that "bring things into being" in the first place. This is the basis of what Graeber (2011) called a "political ontology of the imagination," whereby artists and revolutionaries stand united in the performative-utopian commitment that the world is still "something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (42, 47).

If there is a more strategic angle to be derived from the common dismissal of utopia and performance, in the public sphere, the first step taken in this essay is to ask how each of the two concepts might help address the other's perceived weaknesses and blind spots. One way around, a utopian horizon might at least amend the sense of passive determinism that seems to colour some dismissive attitudes to performativity as a concept. The other way around, a performative framing might quite fruitfully relativize some default criticisms of utopia, too briefly listed in the first paragraph: hence the very issue of reality could be redefined through J. L. Austin's ([1955] 1962) initial twist toward causality—'performatives' judged as "happy" or not rather than true or false—whilst the claim of utopias negating some selfish 'human nature' could be countered by Judith Butler's (1993) insistence that any such 'essence' is only ever a performative effect.

In the following section, accordingly, I explore how a very general definition of performativity might rid utopia of some of its overly static connotations. If the former is a matter of doing, then the latter can be understood not only as a distant aspiration, but as a matter of *doing differently*, in the embodied present of some social formation. In the concluding section, I use the ambiguous etymology of utopia to suggest where its performance could concretely begin, against the very 'realities' that deem it impossible. If those realities are so designed as to drain the time, space, and energy from any more utopian pursuits, to start rehearsing their own utopias, people need to somehow *take the time and make the space* for their performance (as the powers that be certainly

are). Again, this is a social process that implies difficult questions of oppression and privilege, but at least, in targeting what makes utopias 'utopian'—from the crude performative perspective proposed—it opens a way toward performing them into new reality.

On Performativity, or Doing Differently?

The basic dynamic through which I will be approaching the concept of performativity is fairly straightforward: people *do* something, and it begins to look like some *thing*. Hence acting in specific ways comes to suggest an inner essence or 'character,' and cherishing societal alternatives is soon dubbed 'a utopia,' meaning essentialist escape.

While this is based in etymology (the Old French *parfornir*, "to do, carry out, finish, accomplish") and in Austin's initial discussion of "doing things" with words (1962), similar accents are found in two recent PhD dissertations in Utopian Studies, by the political philosopher Jerry Burkette (2022) and the sociologist Keijo Lakkala (2021). For Burkette, strikingly, utopia is not a thing but "something that people do," hence its "proper grammatical usage" should actually be as a verb—as in *to utopia* (42, 28). For his part, Lakkala finds contemporary utopias' future horizons reduced to utopian 'counter-practices,' in the present, that instantiate "a radically different logic of doing" (129). In this, his main influence is *Crack Capitalism* by the Marxist sociologist John Holloway (2010), defining his concept of 'the crack' as "the perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing" (21), "a different way of doing or relating" (29), "a different set of social relations" (55–6). Elsewhere, this most poetic of Marxists calls for a "revolt of verbs against nouns," these latter having "swallowed up the verbs that created them," and places his hope in "the latent [as] the crisis of the apparent, the verb [as] the crisis of the noun" (Holloway 2019, 268–75).

The verb as the crisis of the noun: this is the key to why performance is so integral to utopia. If the danger of utopia is that it becomes a rigid 'thing' forcefully imposed, then performance is needed to keep the promise of utopia alive—to keep its verbs from rigidifying into nouns, the varieties of its doing from becoming one settled 'thing,' the temporality of its making, from being bounded into one 'good place' (good for whom?). If both concepts are attacked for their virtual connotations—as a mirage or illusion—then the materiality of utopia stands to gain from the more playful materiality of performance: as stereotypes go, it's no longer 'look at the Soviet Union' but 'come and join the fun'!

From a performing arts perspective, to be sure, this notion of performativity is far and wide, merging with practice at one end (doing) and production (of things) at the other. With a utopian orientation, however, the very point is to try and remember the connection: that what we practice *has* been produced and that other practices *can* always be produced. Theoretically, if at the risk of naïve universalism, this generic formulation becomes highly 'performative' when applied to social contexts that are *not* customarily regarded as 'things done' let alone utopian—to see them as such is to effectively defamiliarize them not only as merely habitual but also as changeable. This is akin to what Simon Shepherd (2016) suggests in his critique of Performance Studies: that whereas definitions of 'performance' by means of performance risk an uneasy universalism making

everything the same and losing the specificity of practice, such specificity is better respected when performance is used as a metaphorical lens for something else (217, 197). While the field of its application is wide already, utopia is something else indeed.

Elaboration: repetition of norms, utopian aspiration and failure

To better specify the basic dynamic I am suggesting, Judith Butler's (1993) account of gender performativity remains a useful starting point, even if the context is very different. In Butler's terms, the above 'doing' of performative 'things' would reflect aspects of *reiteration* (in some social context) and *normativity* (with its excluded outside): to properly perform 'masculinity,' say, and not be excluded as 'queer,' one has to repeat the sort of behaviour one's society considers masculine. Hence, gender performativity is simply defined as a "reiteration of norms" (234). However, Butler also insists that the two aspects are not really separate, and provides us with four important qualifiers as to how the doing and the done relate; these are italicized in the following recap.

On the one hand, any norm—or utopia!—can only ever be *approximated* by its performances, and yet its reiteration may appear *compulsory*: one can never quite embody it, but one has to perform accordingly, or else one will be excluded from the community. (Yes, so far this chimes well with the anti-utopian reading of utopias as necessarily totalitarian, albeit here they might become so without our even noticing.) On the other hand, insofar as any norm is only ever *produced* in its repetition—i.e. it only becomes a done thing when people actually keep doing it—this very historicity needs to be "*concealed* or dissimulated" (Butler 1993, 12; emphasis added) for the norm to remain potent and the performance to appear natural. As a 'girl,' then, it is assumed that one is not performing anything but only expressing an inner essence of one's own; here, the utopian variant could be something like '*this* is no utopia, this is the reality you all need to live by.'

So, the doing of things implies a repetition of norms; verbs congealing into nouns again. Insofar as Butler is concerned with the constitution of social identities by norms repeated and concealed, however, the inverse of this would be the constitution of norms by *actions* that themselves need to be obscured for the norm to stand. The first focus aligns with the determinist reading of Butler—where any opposition is always already "implicated in that which one opposes" (1993, 241)—and with the long tradition, in social theory, set to convince people that their utopias don't really count against the forces of discourse, desire, debt, 'the economy' or some other overwhelming 'reality.' The second, more utopian option is simply to begin with the doing or the action itself, as radical theorists like Graeber and Holloway would advise us; it is not unconstrained, and it need not be only human, but neither is it an unchangeable force of nature. Hence, too, the 'things' done or performed are "really just patterns of action" (Graeber 2001, 59): whether social constructions or more material realities—identities, utopias, places, institutions—they both reflect and constrain action, and remain therefore vulnerable.

Crucially, the latter is not a voluntaristic account either: not a matter of single actions, performativity kicks in when the thing *done* lingers on and affects further *doing*. As cultural critic Max Haiven (2014) elaborates on Holloway's poetic categories, whatever people collectively create, it will "inform, discipline and shape how [they] act and cooperate"; rather than there being a perfect

utopia ever in reach, "the solidification of the doing into the done cannot be avoided, just worked on and through" (162–6). Hence, norms and nouns can never quite be avoided (if people like some norm they call it 'values,' if not they call it 'ideology'), but they might be considered as more aspirational than absolute. If one aspect of Butlerian gender performativity is to denounce assumptions of pregiven 'essences'—the grounding of gendered acts in essential differences in nature—then perhaps utopia could still allow us to intuit an *essentially different* future, inexorably intertwined with its performances: that which orients our actions even if it becomes "real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988, 527)?

Notably, this is different from the kind of imagery through which utopia is usually denounced. Rather than a detailed blueprint forcefully imposed on unsuspecting victims, it begins as a vague aspiration of a better way of being or relating, a receding horizon which, when performed over time, may eventually stifle into a habit or a norm that rather inhibits or conceals other ways of relating and should better be abandoned. While the very idea of social 'norms' could be seen as utterly utopian—the idea that people would behave in a predictable way—any performative utopia first emerges as an exception to some norm and may even be fiercely refused, but then, once broken through, it might itself evolve into a new norm, a done thing, defining common sense. If this looks like a failure of the initial aspiration, it often is. If we think of utopia as performative, it will fail by default; it is precisely because the utopian vision can never be fully embodied that it needs to be constantly performed or assimilated—in Butler's view anyway, performativity "not only fails" but indeed "depends on failure" (2010, 159).

Utopian dramaturgies: from promise to warning, imagination to common sense

This also begins to point toward some implicit temporalities that seem crucial indeed. Focusing on its very unfolding, first, perhaps the concept of performative utopias allows us to recognize real-world utopias at different stages of their performance? If we define utopia as a more open way of doing that also risks its own institutionalization, there is a sense in which this dynamic already contains the anti-utopian critique in itself: reduced to its basic speech acts, a utopia may begin as a *promise* but end as a *warning*. In the language of doing things, the good and bad of utopia and dystopia only go to identify a general sense of openness or closure: whether the performed utopia still affords further movement or if it is already 'fully furnished,' in the sense of *per*-formed. Stated otherwise, the far ends correspond to the more antitheatrical and philosophical connotations of performance, as conspicuously 'unreal' then silently creating reality itself.

From one perspective, including both the negative and the positive under one concept is just one more way to extend it beyond any usability. From another, though, it does remind us that things are mutable and have life cycles, that they often contain the seeds of their own reversal, and that the worst of times, too, shall pass—a glimmer of hope that will feel scant when the time scale extends over generations. In a more theatrical idiom, if *representational* utopias and dystopias depict conditions in societies that are respectively 'better' or 'worse' than the reference reality of their writing, then *performative* utopias would cover the range from one to the other, and might even be measured by whether people can still do things with their lives or become generally stuck in arrangements that don't perform anymore yet are still performed. (Hence the ethics is still there:

a fascist utopia can be highly utopian and performatively efficacious, and yet it is a utopia of violence and closure, not one for opening up the common imagination.)

Ultimately, then, performative utopias are precisely about making social realities. The *most* performative are those that are accepted as 'common sense' for longer periods of time—and still, as disciplines like history and anthropology tell us, each such common sense only presents *one* way of doing things which can and will be changed over time. Beside such social scientific approaches, theatre, performance, and artistic research provide a vast field of experimentation on the as-ifs of human (re)production: to bring utopia together with performativity is to remind oneself that, on the one hand, utopias need to be performed, and on the other, that there is a gap between performative doing and the not-yet or the no-longer of the thing done. In the early stages of any utopian cycle, the gap is sure to be wider—in line with those who would reduce utopia to a fully mental phenomenon—but later on, with both the idea and the practice equally embodied in everyday life, they may longer be recognized as 'utopian' or 'performative' at all.

Against ideas of utopia as somehow free of conflict, performative utopia, as it emerges from the above, will only ever point to an unsolvable duality, tension, or paradox—one that we are constantly called to deal with in our attempts to make sense of our realities, or to make our realities make more sense: the hiatus between doing and done, intention and outcome, aspiration and imposition, imagination and violence. As activist author Astra Taylor (2019) argues in her presciently-titled *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*, often the real challenge is precisely that of living with these paradoxes (hers include perennial questions of freedom/equality, conflict/consensus, inclusion/exclusion, spontaneity/structure, and present/future). For utopia, I now proceed to suggest, the main tension is with the very realities that seek to define it as such.

How to Perform Utopias: Making Space, Taking Time?

Beginning with loose etymologies, again, there are several paradoxical connotations to the utopian tradition that might help us qualify its proposed performativity as well. First is the tension between the *negation* (the no-place) and the *affirmation* (the good place) that Kathi Weeks (2011) dubs utopia's precisely "performative dimensions": where negation produces estrangement, affirmation produces hope (204–7; cf. Bell 2017, 170). Hence, utopia is simultaneously performed against one reality so as to affirm another; no idealistic bliss devoid of conflict, it gets its very sense from its opposition to a reality that denies it—even if the latter were another utopia gone stale or dystopian. In Gary Wilder's (2022) "concrete utopianism," for example, various abolition movements (of slavery, prisons, police, collective debt, or fossil fuels) all "presuppose a world that does not yet exist even as they may help to propel into existence just such a world" (9).

Then again, all such utopian openings are often negated as soon as they arise—not in the aforementioned sense of turning hegemonic over time but through fierce opposition. In the Global North alone, such anti-utopian negation even seems to come in regular cycles: first, after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1989, there is a new upsurge of anarchist thought with the alter-

globalization or Global Justice Movement—and then 9/11 happens and the global police takes over. After the 2008 economical crash and the harsh austerity measures that follow, a new wave of popular movements arises, from the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the Spanish Indignados to the halting of oil pipes at Standing Rock—and then Donald Trump takes power. From the very next day with its worldwide Women's Marches, millions who had never protested in their lives begin to mobilize, climaxing in movements like Extinction Rebellion, the Yellow Vests, and a renewed Black Lives Matter—but then many of these are halted by the 2020 coronavirus.

Here, let these impressionistic examples suggest utopia's relation to 'reality'; if we accept Graeber's provocation, cited earlier, the latter will look utterly different whether we assume imagination or violence as its ultimate performative principle. From the perspective of the imagination, and for any utopian project of change anyway, the relevant level of reality might simply be the pragmatic one where things happen—hence various 'processual' utopians will define *society*, from an anarchist background, as "a mode of relating rather than an essential and rational entity" (Firth 2012, 23), or *world*, phenomenologically, as "a social and ethical matrix through which particular ways of being, knowing, making, and relating are inherited and cultivated" (Wilder 2022, 65). When it comes to the kind of 'reality' for which 'there are no alternatives,' however, it can be argued that the focus is precisely *not* on change but on keeping things the same, and that often enough, this happens through some form of overt or covert violence.

More often than not, then, utopian projects like those cited above will not be thwarted by their 'utopianism,' but are ferociously opposed by the powers that be—as primitive, barbaric, irrational, or romantic ("useless people feeling important"). To propose a bold argument, just as performative utopias only become 'real' to the extent that they are actually performed, so they also become *unreal* only to the extent that they are denied, forbidden, or foreclosed. As Graeber (2011) had it, hopelessness too "needs to be produced," and for that there is "a vast bureaucratic apparatus," global and decades in the making, "that renders any thought of changing the world seem an idle fantasy" (31–2).

Negation and affirmation: making 'utopian' vs making time and space for utopia

Hence, if utopia is often defined as a 'no-place' (More) that is 'not yet' (Ernst Bloch [1955–9] 1995), then perhaps the 'reality' that defines it as such—as impossible and unreal—could be addressed through all the routines that drain the time, space, and energy from any alternative doings—that actively *make* them impossible under prevailing conditions? Rather than an ontological position, this is an entirely pragmatic statement that might, however, have productive consequences for the performance of more utopian realities—as a first step, recognizing its proper arena as that which fills people's lives, and occupies disproportionate swathes of their time, energy, thoughts, and environments. Often enough, this set of situations equals some hegemonic utopia that has sufficiently managed to institutionalize its own routines and practices, often in the very scenography of its performers' everyday lives—such that even those who no longer buy into its promises have become anaesthetized from perceiving much in the way of alternatives, either.

In the performative interplay of norm and repetition, as I have suggested, absolute ontological distinctions between utopia and reality could even be downplayed for a more plural view of overlapping utopias at different stages of their performance, some of them more open and living, the majority already closed and positively deadly—and these are the ones that are forcibly kept on life support, under whatever crisis provides the pretext (9/11, 2008, Covid, Trump). If this constitutes the habitual performance of *negating utopia*, a first step of *utopian negation* is simply to acknowledge the impossibility of what we are urged to accept as 'real,' natural, and even beneficial, and how it has us so strained as to divert us from the fact that it is not really performing for us.

In such a disposition, the moment of utopian affirmation—of the no-place that is not-yet—could then be framed as *making the space* and *taking the time* to make it happen. In other words, to begin performing what is made impossible to perform, in one's default 'reality,' is to refrain from postponing one's hopes and desires to some future 'utopia' (to make it more real in the present), while also refraining, as much as one can, from the counter-utopian pursuits that habitually devoid our lives of both space and time for anything 'more.' In contrast to Butler's notion of 'repeating differently' (subversively but still within the oppressive norm) this begins to specify a highly open practice of *doing something else*, at least to the extent that this something is not foreclosed by an overt threat of violence, but remains partially a function of one's own doing.

I do see the social privilege inherent in even thinking one could afford to think this—and yet, the idea that one just couldn't is *that* 'reality' speaking, again, which insists that there is no alternative, and dubs those that exist as mere utopias, or plain dystopias. Granted, real seeds of utopia do exist that themselves, under current arrangements anyway, take the form of time-consuming labour, and so are utterly dependent on those arrangements remaining in place (I am thinking of various kinds of paid and unpaid carework). Generally, though, much of the 'doings' that fill the minutes, hours, and days of our everyday lives are not only quite unnecessary but counterproductive to any aspirations of doing anything meaningful: filling forms, meeting deadlines, constantly worrying about it all and then some, sitting in traffic lights, sitting in traffic lights—this is how normative 'realities' are kept in place by the inertia of performative repetition.

The social dimension: on the 'verbs' of common sense and social performance

An important caveat: like the performative 'doing' of the previous section was rather defined as an ongoing *way of doing* than a matter of constant striving, I am not claiming that this utopian doing of 'something else' is for singular individuals to just go and do in some singular present (for most, just quitting wage labour, say, is not an option). Particularly, it will take time, organization, and preferential focus—you don't want to re-fill and hence exhaust your life by fighting every battle at once. Admitting the plurality of oppressions that most people are constantly bearing, the Debt Collective (2020), in the US, is a good for example, prioritizing the abolition of debt for the simple reason that it currently eats most of many people's resources for even dreaming of anything more. Should people achieve relief on this front (and the Debt Collective have attained a lot, over years of unionizing), there would immediately be more space to breathe.

In terms of dreams and promises, this case actually opens out to a whole field of performative utopias. In a perverted inversion, financial debt is imposed on people to enable their utopian hopes, but in many cases it turns out locking up their minds, brains, and hands often for the rest of their lives—all the while backed up by the twisted common sense that morality lies with the creditor, the debtor being forever suspect until all interests are met. While paying one's bills is a commonsense practice upholding the performative norm that one's current life is one's future selves' to pay for (with interest!), refusing to do so is immediately more utopian in the sense of 'not allowed,' and risks a series of increasingly violent sanctions unless doing so is somehow organized (cf. Butler's 'compulsory' gender performances and the 'ostracism' of the queer…).

In this double exposure of utopia and the 'realities' that deny it, one might even go as far as to argue, in a more aesthetic register, that utopia "is to life what poetry is to language … it shows that life is unique and that anything could be done with it" (Viren 2023, 56). While the author of that statement is talking about the rejection of wage labour, and would emphatically *not* identify as any sort of utopian, I do think the displacement fits a performative definition of utopia very precisely: a failed aspect of social reality is negated, by affirming something it categorically denies as impossible.

Again, my imagination here is clearly limited by my sheer privilege—white, male, and still relatively secure in my highly capitalistic society—but let us let that suffice, for the sake of the argument. In such societies, most of their affluent citizens will be *driving* to *work* to *earn* the money to *buy* what they *consume* and then need to *replace*; on a geological time scale quite invisible to their 'intentions,' the exponential repetition of such carbon-intensive practices can even be read as slow environmental violence (Nixon 2011).[1] While the effects of such violence will first be visited somewhere far away—on peoples the normative economic utopia might term 'externalities' then 'disposables'—the point of breaking it down to a list of such common-sense verbs is that however imposed the system may be on its performers, it remains theirs to perform, indeed it depends on their doing its deeds, as evinced by the abounding restrictions to strikes and protests that the defenders of fascist reality begin enacting once in power.

To be sure, both ecological collapse and authoritarian oppression will lead to dystopian outcomes. Where catastrophe hits and reality breaks altogether, there is a very practical sense in which new utopias need to be instantly improvised through whatever networks of mutual aid there may be. Against the assumed breakout of Hobbesian anarchy (a familiar storyline designed to keep people apart), authors like Rebecca Solnit (2016) have documented time and again how crisis situations rather bring people together, emboldening them to re-engage their more cooperative, altruistic, indeed *utopian* selves that lie latent and denied in the 'real' world. Before such extreme circumstances, though, even the smaller cracks in routine do provide real opportunities for early rehearsal. Through such slow erosion, as many dissidents and anarchists have always argued, the 'other world' people might hope for would already be at least partially in place, when the current order collapses—be it under stronger opposition or its own impossibility. Again, this 'world' means a transformation of everyday life, less in its material basis than in its relationality, its norms and its acts, and the common sense that holds it all together.

Inhabiting the paradoxes of utopian time and space

In the end, we are left with the kinds of tensions and paradoxes emphasized at the end of the previous section: doing and done, intention and outcome, imagination and violence, disaster and daily life, individual and collective, the personal and the planetary. By way of no conclusion (there are none to performative utopias…), let me finally only suggest that a properly 'utopian' perspective on all such paradoxes—utopian both in the sense of aspirational and often actually impossible—would be to entertain both extremes simultaneously: a kind of double vision that entails both an attentive presence (to what is or has been) and an ongoing rehearsal (of what may yet become), and which, at both ends, boils down to making space, taking time, and scaling perception.

Zooming in, this means the kind of negation or estrangement suggested earlier, or any attempts at even temporarily extending our 'aesthetically deprived' attention spans—at becoming once more sensitized to the specificity of a situation, at "breaking duration … to see each moment as distinct, as full of possibilities" (Holloway 2010, 236). Hence one might also consider performative utopia as a theoretical practice of perceiving otherwise: if the 'natural' has become such by our stopping to notice it, then one way of learning to dwell over it again is to start perceiving it as unnatural, or indeed utopian. This also allows a sense of performance as presence to the world—as paying attention rather than taking for granted; as "astonishment in quotidian things" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 5); as an exercise in non-alienation that may be hard to sustain, in the long term, but that may also provide the sense of a crack in reality, of standing slightly beside while still fully within.

Even though human action tends to be limited to human perspectives, I would argue that its horizons need not be: if we conceive our reality as one of ethical interconnection, and feel it being threatened by a world of compulsory individualism and alienation—perhaps even telling us to "reject the evidence of [our] eyes and ears" (Orwell [1949] 2001, 76)—then the first response could be to try and better ground oneself in whatever avenues of interconnection one's immediate world affords (senses, memories, communities, histories).

Zooming out, a utopian outlook includes the cultivation of a slow imagination of how change happens: much like the devastations of global heating will not be in the news as acts of slow violence, so also the cracks of utopia will be made hard to perceive. Against the mechanistic view of instant change—or direct performativity—that soon sinks activists in "bitterness, cynicism, defeatism, knowingness" (Solnit 2016, 60), the call is to recognize our nouns as *slow verbs* that only look permanent the longer they last; to cherish traditions and legacies of change in a form of "temporal solidarity" (Wilder 2022, 120); and also to reach out toward others, beyond the blinders of our mundane preoccupations—to relate across difference, often incommensurable difference.

Indeed, when Burkette (2018) defines utopia as a verb, he suggests mutual aid as its "process," and a sense of "ending," from the small or personal to the apocalyptic, as its condition; assuming that privileged actors are the most powerful to effect real change, but also *structurally primed to reinforce the status quo whatever their motive*, they are "required 'to dystopia' from their default perspectives" (Burkette 2022, 10–14). While this is a tall call in a world where whole identities seem

to depend on the secured intake of meat and gas, the very idea of reaching across is also a strong argument for the instant 'scalability' of performative utopias; rather than their being isolated flights of fancy with no roots in 'real' life, they may take root wherever people intuit a reality larger than habit and custom. As Henri Lefebvre ([1968] 2024) once put it, "*we are all Utopians*, so soon as we wish for something different and stop playing the part of the faithful performer" (77).

Notes

[1] Slow violence is Rob Nixon's term (2011); the adverse environmental effects of work and money have been discussed by Andreas Malm (2016) and Alf Hornborg (2019), respectively.

Works Cited

Allen, Jennifer L. 2022. *Sustainable Utopias: The Art and Politics of Hope in Germany.* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674276208.

Austin, J. L. (1955) 1962. *How to Do Things With Words*. Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. Oxford University Press.

Bell, David M. 2017. *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709697.

Bloch, Ernst. (195 5–9) 1995. *The Principle of Hope.* MIT Press.

Bowditch, Rachel, and Pegge Vissicaro, eds. 2017. *Performing Utopia.* Seagull Books.

Burkette, Jay. 2018. "Utopia as a Verb; Mutual Aid as its Process." Unpublished. https://www.academia.edu/38118925/Utopia_as_a_Verb_Mutual_Aid_as_its_Process.

Burkette, Jerry W. 2022. "Utopian Hope vs. Merely-Political Combat: Directionality for the Kingdom of God." PhD diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. http://hdl.handle.net/10919/108130.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2010. "Performative Agency." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3 (2): 147–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117.

Debt Collective. 2020. *Can't Pay, Won't Pay: The Case for Economic Disobedience and Debt Abolition*. Haymarket Books.

Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.119520.

Eskelinen, Teppo, ed. 2020. *The Revival of Political Imagination: Utopias as Methodology*. Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225633.

Firth, Rhiannon. 2012. *Utopian Politics: Citizenship and Practice.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203155455.

Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780312299064.

Graeber, David. 2011. *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination*. Minor Compositions.

Gunderson, Ryan. 2021. *Hothouse Utopia: Dialectics Facing Unsavable Futures*. Zero Books.

Haiven, Max. 2014. *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons*. Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350219410.

Holloway, John. 2010. *Crack Capitalism.* Pluto Press.

Holloway, John. 2019. *We Are the Crisis of Capital: A John Holloway Reader*. PM Press.

Hornborg, Alf. 2019. *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unravelling the Money-Energy-Technology Complex*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108554985.

Lakkala, Keijo. 2021. "Utopia as Counter-Logical Social Practice." PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä. http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8921-7.

Lefebvre, Henri. (1968) 2024. *Everyday Life in the Modern World.* Translated by Sacha Rabinovitch. Routledge.

Levitas, Ruth. (1990) 2010. *The Concept of Utopia.* Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0010-9.

Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso.

Muñoz, José Esteban. (2009) 2019. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* 10th Anniversary Edition. New York University Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194.

Orwell, George. (1949) 2001. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook. https://dn790002.ca.archive.org/0/items/NineteenEightyFour-Novel-GeorgeOrwell/orwell1984.pdf.

Paavolainen, Teemu. 2023. "On the 'Doing' of 'Something': A Theoretical Defence of 'Performative Protest'." *Performance Research* 27 (3–4): 38–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2155394.

Schechner, Richard. (2002) 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Routledge.

Shepherd, Simon. 2016. *The Cambridge Introduction to Performance Theory.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139600194.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2016. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Haymarket Books.

Taylor, Astra. 2019. *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. Verso.

Viren, Eetu. 2023. *Esseitä*. Tutkijaliitto.

Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394723.

Wilder, Gary. 2022. *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity*. Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823299881.001.0001.

Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Verso.

Biography

Teemu Paavolainen is a research fellow in the Boundaries of Performing research group, Tampere University, where he also gained his PhD in Theatre Studies in 2011. He is the author of two books with Palgrave Macmillan, *Theatricality and Performativity: Writings on Texture From Plato's Cave to Urban Activism* (2018, Performance Philosophy series) and *Theatre/Ecology/Cognition: Theorizing Performer-Object Interaction in Grotowski, Kantor, and Meyerhold* (2012). He has published e.g. in *Performance Research*, *Performance Philosophy*, and *Nordic Theatre Studies*, and in the edited volumes *Cognitive Humanities* (2016) and *The Routledge Companion to Vsevolod Meyerhold* (2022). His current work is enabled by a generous grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation (2024–8).

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ARE WE STILL IN TOUCH? TOWARDS INTER-EMBODIED DRAMATURGIES IN PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

CHRISTINA KAPADOCHA EAST 15 ACTING SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

A haptic introduction

The following practice aims to support you in sensing and cultivating embodied thinking through self-directed touch as the ground of your reading experience. I would like to fully acknowledge the limitations of not being "in the room" with you, but also explore the participatory possibilities presented here towards an experiential perception of this article's critical analysis. I will intentionally not interrupt this facilitation with contextual information at this point, even though underlying philosophical ideas can easily be discerned and will be brought up later in this writing.

The invitation is to approach each offered principle with curiosity and creativity, taking as much time as you need for each step and the transitions in between. If helpful, you could also expand your reading experience by watching Video 1.[1] In the spirit of fostering agency in your reading experience, if you choose to watch the video as part of this introductory practice, I prompt you to respond to your own witnessing—possibly pausing, rewinding, skipping, or simply observing.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):71–100
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101528
ISSN 2057–7176

Video 1: https://vimeo.com/1141672269

This is a practice on touch or physical contact. Non-sexual—I have to bring this "in the room"—personal, self-directed, caring, hopefully resourceful touch. The secret is that intentionally this study does not involve physical contact with someone else. "How is that possible?" you may ask. Hopefully you will sense….

First, as I open up the theme of touch or physical contact, my invitation to you is to softly, without overthinking, attend to three words that come up in your mind when you read the words "touch" or "physical contact". Acknowledge them, try not to judge them, write them down or speak them aloud, and simply keep them in your attention.

Now let's delve deeper into what touch can be, focusing on your individual embodied experience based on five principles: 1. source of contact; 2. points of contact; 3. pressure of contact; 4. movement of contact; and 5. contact with the space.

Principle#1: Source of contact

Find a comfortable sitting position wherever you are. I would like to offer the first principle in this "reading" of touch we are exploring—the "source of contact". Can we agree that when we think of source of contact the first organs that may come to our minds are our hands? If so, I would like to invite you to mindfully bring your hands together in any way you wish to. As if you are about to greet yourself. You may not have to change anything if your hands are already somehow together. Just to give you options in case this will bring you more comfort, it may be palm to palm. It may be interlacing your fingers. It may be one hand on top of the other with your palms facing up. It may be one palm facing down the other palm facing up. When you arrive there, I have a philosophical question for you but let's try not to make it too heavy. Can you distinguish which hand is touching and which hand is touched?

Principle#2: Points of contact

Now I would like for you to focus on the actual "points of contact", let's delve into the detail. As your hands are meeting, which little bits come together? Is it the tips of your fingers with the bottom of your palm? It can be the tips of your fingers touching the knuckles of the other hand. It can be the full surface of your palms meeting. My invitation is for you to start moving between smaller and larger points of contact. Only that, dwell in the simplicity of that. Allow this journey, this ongoing transition from smaller to larger points of contact. Only with your hands. I would like for you to notice how we start playing with some sort of hand-based, touch-based "choreography". Only with that; the journey from smaller to larger points of contact.

Principle#3: Pressure of contact

As you do that, I would like to introduce the next principle—"pressure". What if you allow your hands to meet as if you touch the surface of water? As if you don't want to change something; as if you don't want to direct; just be there, zero of pressure, no pressure at all. And notice—because I'm with you through my own experience—what may be happening to your breathing? What may be happening to your attention? What may be happening even before you allow this contact which gives space in the experience—or at least this is the intention. Respond to what feels right and supportive for you; start adding pressure only to the extent it feels nice; play with different levels of pressure. It may be just adding a little bit of resistance; it may be offering more pressure. The more you play with that, notice how the different levels of pressure starting from your hands can affect the rest of your body.

Principle#4: Movement of contact (towards expanding the source and points of contact)

Of course, we have been moving through our hands, but movement hasn't been our primary guide. So now I would like for you to focus on "movement". What sort of movements can come up between your two hands? It may be rubbing; it may be brushing; it may be patting; it may be tapping; it may be stroking; it may be active stillness. Allow yourself to go for any sort of movement you wish to explore in between your hands; another step in this touch-based, hand-based "choreography". And, as you're focusing on movement, you may realise that the source of contact is there; that the points of contact are still there; that the levels of pressure are very much still there.

When you establish this awareness, let's return to the source of contact. Now, I invite you to take whichever movement feels right for you, and start using it on the rest of your skin body. It may be that you take patting and you literally start mapping the rest of your skin organ. Don't forget any little bit of this "landscape". You may wish to shift from one movement to another when you meet different areas of your skin organ. It may be brushing in the length of your limbs; it may be tapping on your face; it may be using the wholeness of your palm and just allowing a little bit of stillness. You may start realising the sounds that can come up. As you do that, you may find yourself wanting to become a little bit more active; you may not. But if you do, please feel free to respond.

If you're there—I want to give you all the options—you may start noticing that you can move away from only hands-to-body, and you can start meeting more unexpected points of contact. It may be your upper arm meeting the inner part of your thigh. It may be your elbow and your knee. Start mapping all the different possibilities of points of contact through the full source of your skin organ.

Principle#5: Contact with the space

Now you may realise that organically you meet the "skin of the space"; and you meet the skins of the space if you come across different qualities. From body-to-body points of contact, move your attention to body-to-space points of contact. Listen and facilitate the size and the extent to which these come up for you. You may notice that now the source is the wholeness of your skin. You might have moved beyond your hands, but you still have the clarity of very specific points of contact. Focus on the points of contact that want to move you, whether body-to-body or body-to-space points of contact. Observe that you still play with pressure. It can be quite interesting to go for the zero of pressure in relation to the skin of the space; and then adding pressure, what comes up? Keep playing with movement; you can slide, you can stomp, you can rest, you can observe. Notice your points of contact and then allow them to move you.

Go for it, bring all the principles together through your curiosity.

As part of this integration, you may find yourself wanting to sound or to speak through your first-person observations. You could try saying "I touch and …" or follow through with any other verbal or non-verbal creative expression that emerges. You might also take this further into writing, noticing any new expressive forms that arise from the attention you have cultivated. Acknowledge how you wish to bring this practice to a close. Do you notice that we have set up the ground of a dramaturgy together?

A contextual introduction

This experiential opening serves, in practice, as an entry point into what I introduce here as inter-embodied dramaturgies within participatory performance practices. Inter-embodied dramaturgies propose both a practical and theoretical—or, in one word, *praxical*—framework for cultivating critical awareness and facilitating contingent dynamics between practitioners and participants. As a set of philosophical principles embedded in practice, they seek to foster inter-embodied attention infused with ethical perspectives on diverse interconnection and differentiation. As a praxical methodology grounded in its philosophical implications, it offers a flexible structure that enables participation to unfold across both participatory workshop and performance contexts, supporting adaptable modes of inter-embodiment through self-directed touch and somatically inspired facilitation.

More specifically, the outlined tactile principles were developed through the Practice-as-Research (PaR) project From Haptic Deprivation to Haptic Possibilities, which explores somatically inspired methods for cultivating creativity, care, wellbeing, and the beneficial potentials of touch through participatory research activities.[2] Initially designed in response to COVID-19 physical distancing guidelines in performance training and production, the project centres on a structured investigation of self-directed touch. This is touch initiated and managed by oneself in relation to one's own physicality and environment. Italicised extracts in this article are drawn from the documented facilitation of the performance-workshop *Are We Still in Touch?*, which anchors the project's in-person group activities and serves as a case study of an evolving inter-embodied

dramaturgy. These extracts, alongside video documentation, are embedded to offer a direct connection to the performance-workshop as inter-embodied dramaturgy in practice.

In this context, dramaturgy is understood both as the arrangement of structure and content within the project's practical sessions and performance-workshops, and as a dynamic practice integral to the process of performance-making. Thus, although the performance-workshop discussed here is not a participatory performance per se, it is considered an event that manifests a form of dramaturgy—one that can potentially lead to a performance as part of a sustained creative process. This understanding aligns with postdramatic perspectives that extend dramaturgy beyond traditional performance settings and recognise all compositional elements that contribute to performance-making, including how bodies act and interact.[3] For instance, dramaturg and academic researcher Maaike Bleeker (2023) outlines her expanded concept of "doing dramaturgy" and thinking through practice, pointing out "new perspectives on what dramaturgy can be, and how it can be part of creative processes" (24). Drawing on Fiona Graham (2017) and David Williams (2010), Bleeker notes that "every performance, and many other things as well [such as meetings, conferences, presentations] can be said to have a dramaturgy that is embodied in how they are constructed" (24).

Notably, and in resonance with Bleeker's ideas on expanded dramaturgies, I observed that the five principles introduced in the opening practice—source of contact, points of contact, pressure of contact, movement of contact, and contact with the space—together with the arising structures, movement, and poetic language can be considered a form of dramaturgy. Furthermore, I began to cultivate a dramaturgical awareness: one attuned to inter-embodied narratives, emergent structures, and non-verbal expressions co-created with participants. This evolving awareness additionally aligns closely with Vida Midgelow's (2015) concept of "dramaturgical consciousness" in improvisatory dance performance: an embodied, reflexive, and critical awareness that enables practitioners to navigate "uncertain territories" with adaptability and responsiveness—qualities she identifies as fundamental to dramaturgical practice (110–111). A similar requirement for contingent reflexivity also underpins the PaR and somatic methodological strands of this project. They are summarised as openness to the "not-yet-knowing" in PaR (Heron and Kershaw 2018, 37), and a cultivated availability to what lies beyond conscious knowledge in somatically informed embodied inquiry (Leigh and Brown 2021, 15–19). As a practitioner-researcher who initiates and facilitates this investigation, I step into the dynamic role of the performer-facilitator, simultaneously becoming an active dramaturg. Midgelow's notion of dramaturgical consciousness refers to how the practitioner, the improviser in her context, can assume dramaturgical responsibilities from the *inside* of the practice's embodied experience, without separating improvisation from dramaturgy and critical awareness (2015, 177).

Inspired by this evolving dramaturgical consciousness within a research methodology that brings together PaR and somatically inspired inquiry in performance praxis, this article does not aim to offer a comprehensive study of dramaturgy. Instead, it engages with dramaturgical thinking as an emergent conceptual framework developed in dialogue with the project's philosophical underpinnings grounded in embodied phenomenology and feminist perspectives on inter-

embodiment. My approach acknowledges a dynamic conversation with existing dramaturgical discourses, such as Bleeker's and Midgelow's concepts introduced above, in which embodied, practice-based, and critical perspectives on dramaturgy intersect with a specific focus on inter-embodied ethics, care, and meaning-making.

The term *inter-embodied dramaturgies* is introduced here to highlight and expand on how dramaturgy can emerge not from a singular, objectified view of *the body* as a physical entity for composition, but through inner-outer dynamics, interrelational plurality, and the differentiated lived experience of conscious, sensing, and thinking co-participation.[4] Importantly, this view resists an essentialised notion of the unified or idealised body as a fixed, universal category. Instead, it embraces a de-essentialised understanding of embodiment as multiple, situated, and co-constituted between diverse individuals through relational contexts. Here, embodiment is not confined to an individual's physical form but is understood as a shifting condition of being-with others—shaped by inner–outer dynamics and by differences (ethnic, racial, cultural, perceptual, ethical, etc.)—and unfolding through conscious, reciprocal engagement.

To elaborate on intercorporeal dynamics and how self-directed touch cultivates inter-embodied potentials—even without direct contact with another person—this research draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, particularly his notion of *flesh*. Merleau-Ponty's foundational concepts are extended through feminist critique that foregrounds difference and plurality in contrast to the universalising and unifying tendencies of his fleshiness. Through the lens of touch, inter-embodied resonances are explored in praxis, aligning with principles of relational proximity articulated by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey in *Thinking Through the Skin* (2004). Ahmed and Stacey frame inter-embodiment as "a way of thinking through the nearness of other others, but a nearness which involves distantiation and difference" (7). Inter-embodiment here refers to a relationality that acknowledges both proximity and separation, enabling the experience of connection with others while maintaining individual perspectives and agency. Ahmed's broader ethical orientation towards "being with" differently (2000; 2005; 2006) further supports the project's investigation of self-directed touch not as an autonomous or predetermined act, but rather a latently interrelational one that evolves within a shared field of diverse embodiment.

Praxically, the project's tactile nature is inevitably situated within a framework of "haptic dramaturgy" (Walsh 2014, 58), contributing to PaR academic studies that investigate interrelational dynamics and participation through somatically informed approaches to touch. In addition to Midgelow's artistic research within the context of dance dramaturgy, other relevant examples include Lisa May Thomas' (2022) investigations into touch-based interpersonal dynamics, particularly within technologically mediated processes; Paula Kramer's (2025) focus on tactility and environments (2025); and Emma Meehan's (Carter and Meehan 2020) research on aspects of interpersonal touch and chronic pain in performance and health contexts. Haptic Possibilities contributes to these approaches by placing self-directed touch at the centre of the investigation. Especially in the wake of societal shifts catalysed by the pandemic, including issues of isolation and mental health, carefully facilitated personal tactile experience appears to afford not only individual embodied presence and agency but also deeper relationality and collective dramaturgical inquiry.

Moreover, the performance-workshop *Are We Still in Touch?*, as a case study of an inter-embodied dramaturgy, extends beyond the methodological intersections of dance and somatic practices examined in the above PaR studies. It broadens the awareness of multidisciplinary dramaturgical participation by studying open invitations for participants to become co-creators, co-performers, and co-investigators positioning them as active contributors to an emergent dramaturgy. Drawing, among other influences, on my Greek cultural and theatre background—which, while white, sits outside dominant Euro-American traditions—the philosophical and practical underpinnings of the practice also contribute to critiques of *the essentialised body* within somatic dance methodologies. These critiques include Doran George's (2020) challenge to the concept of the "natural body" in somatics, Royona Mitra's (2021) intersectional analysis of supposedly "democratic" touch in Contact Improvisation (CI), and Sarah Holmes' (2023) investigation of white fragility and privilege in somatic discourse.

Within this expanded and critically informed framework, the performance-workshop investigates inter-embodied dynamics and emergent dramaturgical processes through the facilitation and performativity of the integrative role of the performer-facilitator. The practice asks: What new dramaturgical and ethical possibilities arise when participatory, somatic, and performance methodologies intersect? How might the roles of facilitator and performer co-constitute one another through embodied presence and responsiveness? And crucially, how can touch that does not involve direct physical contact still generate experiences of inter-embodiment and relationality? In this context, dramaturgy is carefully designed in advance, yet flexible enough to accommodate the particularities and emergent dynamics of each group.

Aiming to echo the nature of this structure in this reading experience, I opened this article by guiding you through the basic *Are We Still in Touch?* dramaturgical steps: 1. considering three words on touch; 2. experiencing the five principles of self-directed touch; and 3. reflecting creatively. In the following sections, I will maintain the performance-workshop's structure in dialogue with critical aspects on inter-embodied dynamics between myself and the project participants. The complementary video documentation similarly follows the unfolding of the process and preserves the cohesive development of the practice as it was experienced across different iterations.[5] Beyond demonstrating the practice itself, the embedded videos aim to illustrate the principles of the discussed methodology through examples of dynamic and diverse inter-embodiment, analysed throughout this article. To this end, I integrate in the writing specific video excerpts, as I did for the opening practice above, and "curate" your attention to what I consider potentially valuable contributions to wider participatory practices and research. Nevertheless, I do not mean to be prescriptive; you may prefer to engage with the videos in a different manner.

Based on what Robin Nelson (2022) identifies as "moments of insight" in PaR (55, 90), I aim to acknowledge such moments in the performance-workshop and unpack inter-embodied dynamics in them based on this discussion's critical framework. By combining conceptual information and critical analysis (in standard format) with video documentation, facilitation extracts (in italics) and participants' reflections (as quotes), my objective is to invite a holistic engagement with the discussed argument and methodology, both cognitively and experientially. The *Are We Still in Touch?*

material interwoven here draws from the fourth iteration of the performance-workshop, as it took place at the Siobhan Davies Studios in South London on July 2, 2023. This iteration, compared to others, leveraged the artistic identity of the space, the spaciousness of the studio and the performance backgrounds of most participants. These factors expanded possibilities for performativity and facilitated diverse video documentation of the process.[6] Additionally, prior to the session, I planned to test more overtly dramaturgical components of "haptic scenography", adding floor cushions, fabrics, and other natural materials like ropes for participants' active engagement (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Participant interacting with hanging ropes as part of the Are We Still in Touch? haptic scenography at Siobhan Davies Studios, London, July 2, 2023. Scenography collaborator Mayou Trikerioti. Photo by Christa Holka.

Bringing together the practical and theoretical components outlined above, this article analyses how the structure and content of the *Are We Still in Touch?* dramaturgy can create a space for co-expression, co-performance, and inter-embodied thinking between participants and the practitioner-researcher. This contingent dramaturgy seeks to challenge structures of embodied homogeneity, hierarchical themes, and deterministic expectations, positioning performance philosophy, conceptual philosophy, and embodied practice in dynamic interaction. Ultimately, this discussion proposes that inter-embodied dramaturgies, as part of participatory performance and research practices, can both contribute to performance praxis and deepen ethical awareness in collective care, potentially opening new pathways for relational and societal transformation.

Establishing somatic and philosophical negotiations in inter-embodiment

Are We Still in Touch? begins as the performer-facilitator, myself, extends a non-verbal welcome to all individuals in the studio, inviting eye contact as a somatic gesture from participants who choose to actively engage. With eye contact approached as a complex and intimate gesture of somatic witnessing, this opening aims to set the tone for the performance-workshop's focus on relationality while acknowledging the interaction between the practitioner and each person in the group. From a dramaturgical perspective, this enactment exemplifies what Bleeker (2023), building on Donna Haraway's concept of response-ability, articulates in her discussion of *doing dramaturgy* as "a praxis of care that involves the capacity to attend to and respond within the messy worlds we inhabit and participate in" (1). In my experience within the moment, presented in the brief Video 2 below, the non-verbal communication of this intended care cannot be assumed, and I am fully aware of my ethical responsibility to cultivate it attentively as each event unfolds.

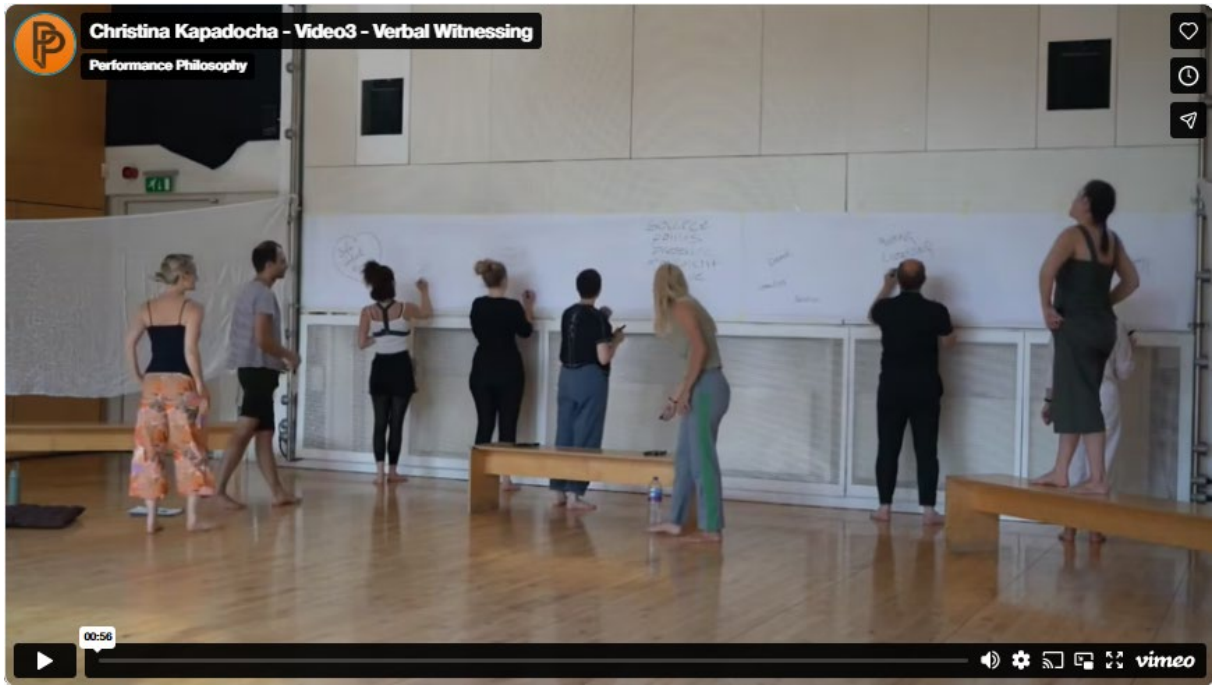
Video 2: https://vimeo.com/1141672300

The initial non-verbal welcome through eye contact is followed by contextual information, including a brief introduction to my professional identity and the Haptic Possibilities project. In resonance with Bleeker's association of dramaturgical practice with ethical and caring response-abilities, grounded in specific skills and expertise, I recognise the ethical need to outline my professional journey. In doing so, I frame the facilitation of the performance-workshop within a trajectory of sustained development spanning nearly two decades. Educationally, I highlight key steps: graduating from the Greek National Theatre Drama School (2008), completing fully funded postgraduate studies in the UK—an MA in Acting (2011) and a PaR PhD in Actor Training (2016)—and obtaining a diploma as a Somatic Movement Educator and Therapist (2016). It is important for

me to clarify to participants that, while movement therapy informs my work, it is not its primary intention; rather, it operates as an undercurrent supporting the performance-workshop's somatic dimensions.

Although I do not explicitly state this, my professional trajectory also influences how I attune to inter-embodied dynamics within the group through a somatic mode of witnessing. In the somatic practice of Authentic Movement, studied as part of the Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy (IBMT) Diploma training I undertook, somatic witnessing refers to an embodied state of active engagement, requiring the witness to attend to others while remaining attuned to their own physicality, senses and sensations, feelings and imagery (see Adler 1999, 154; Hartley 2004, 63–67). While this witnessing attention has primarily therapeutic applications, modifications of somatic witnessing inform my methods as an active performer-facilitator within the performance-workshop. These modifications, manifested in the form of verbal and/or non-verbal interactions, aspire to cultivate inter-embodied dynamics between myself and the participants, while I maintain a conscious awareness of my own experience. This process also reflects Midgelow's concept of dramaturgical consciousness within the dancer's improvisation.

For instance, my first invitation to participants is to think and write down three words on touch based on free cognitive association, as I also prompted you in the opening practice. I explain that they may choose to record their words privately on their questionnaires or more playfully by writing them with markers on large paper rolls placed on one wall and one side of the floor (see Fig. 2). My witnessing in this section involves sensing how the arising words register in my body and voice as I read them out loud. In Video 3 you can observe this physical-vocal interaction and how my voice shifts from higher to lower pitch as I read different words and move between spots in the space, responding dynamically to the participants' contributions. I understand this mode of witnessing as a dramaturgical component that opens possibilities for performativity and for emergent associations between different words. In my perception, this witnessing intrinsically becomes a method for navigating dramaturgical consciousness as it arises relationally between the performer-facilitator and the participants. My intention is not to impose or monopolise the expression but to recognise and validate all associations through my own embodied process, while fostering active engagement, creative, and critical awareness within the collective.



Video 3: https://vimeo.com/1141672316

Fig. 2. Performer-facilitator and audience-participants interact as the participants write on the large paper roll on the wall and they observe each other's responses. Are We Still in Touch? at Siobhan Davies Studios, London, July 2, 2023. Photo by Christa Cholka.

To transparently interrupt my prominence in the room, I then invite participants to look around at each other's words and verbally express their responses either to what they wrote or to someone else's contributions.[7] This shift aims to decentralise my authority and support the project's emphasis on reciprocal relationality. As part of my facilitation, I explain that the intention behind these prompts can be summarised in the phrase "to feel the skin of the group" or, more precisely and in line with the project's focus on plurality and differentiation, to feel *the skins* within the group. This articulation and practice resonate directly with Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of "the skin of the community", which describes how the negotiation of physical proximity and distance is affectively shaped through processes of alignment and disalignment.

In her essay on affect and boundary formation, Ahmed (2005) writes: "it is through moving toward and away from others or objects that individual bodies become aligned with some others and against other others, a form of alignment that temporarily 'surfaces' as the skin of the community" (104). By inviting participants to respond to one another's words and presences, the facilitation actively engages with Ahmed's proposition that community is not given but is *surfaced*. It is emergent, taking shape through movement and affective proximity. The participants' shared yet differentiated responses give rise to what Ahmed terms a "temporary alignment", which in the context of the workshop becomes an inter-embodied texture of togetherness. Rather than seeking unity, the practice supports a felt sense of plural belonging that embraces difference.

Participants appear to align as they bring up connections between tactile warmth and calm, touch as a way of feeling visible, mapping the body, communicating between other animals (such as chimpanzees), and surviving. I verbally echo sentences from their responses like "it helps me feel calmer" and "[it] makes me feel present, alive, here, visible, seen". In this context, alignment manifests as a collective reference, forming a temporary "skin of the group" that holds, rather than overrides, the particularities of each participant's contribution. This approach to collective subjectivities also echoes the project's investigation of embodiment as active, interrelational and diverse dynamics that connect us by being *bodies* with processes such as thinking, imagining, feeling, sensing, and creating, along with evolving interactions with our environments and others. This philosophical framing of somatically inspired embodiment underpins the project's methodological framework.

From actor-training to performance environments, my research has been occupied by critical interrogations of mind-body, inner-outer, self-other intersubjective dynamics using somatically inspired methods such as gestures, movement, touch, verbal or sound input (see Kapadocha 2016; 2018; 2021; 2023). These dynamics, as modes of being and perceiving, are philosophically aligned with Merleau-Ponty's discourse on embodied phenomenology, his notions of the *lived body* and the *flesh*. Adding to phenomenological ideas introduced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002) emphasises the experience of the world through a body which is simultaneously object and subject of perception: as "we are in the world through our body" and "we perceive the world with our body" we also rediscover our self as both a natural self (an object) and a subject of perception (239). The most important aspect in the connection with the world for

Merleau-Ponty is communication with others, described by the philosopher through the concept of intersubjectivity:

> I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002, 412)

This interrelation is expressed more fully in the philosopher's understanding of the *flesh.* The relational engagement suggested by the porous quality of the flesh as a "feeling" or concept allows a simultaneous dialogue between internal and external, self and other perception, resembling actual characteristics of human body structures such as the skin organ, the prominent locus of investigation in the Haptic Possibilities project. Merleau-Ponty ([1964] 1968) invites the reader to think of the flesh not as a union of contradictories but as "an 'element' of Being" (139, 147). Inspired by Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 1989), Merleau-Ponty's flesh represents the *exemplar sensible*, the body that is at the same time sensible and sensate—the body that touches and is touched, as enacted in the discussed practice (135). An extension of the relation with the embodied self is the world which, as it is perceived by the flesh body, it also *reflects* the element of the flesh (248, 255). This experiential thinking sheds light on possibilities that can arise from tactile reflexivity empirically examined in the performance-workshop.

Despite Merleau-Ponty's pivotal contributions to recognising embodied and interrelational perception, his ideas seem to provide little acknowledgement of *embodied differences* in multiple and diverse subjectivities. This brings forward the issue of the *one-universal* body, which I have previously addressed in my research challenging logocentric problematics of dualism and universalism in actor-training discourses (see Kapadocha 2016; 2021). Feminist theorists have crucially filled this "gap" in the philosophical discourse on embodiment. As Ahmed and Stacey (2004) point out, "for feminist, queer and post-colonial critics there remain the troubling questions: If one is always with other bodies in a fleshy sociality, then how are we 'with' others differently? How does this inter-embodiment involve the social differentiation between bodily others?" (6). They caution against fetishising the singular body as an abstract or lost object, addressing instead the question of embodiment through "a recognition of the function of social differences in establishing the very boundaries which appear to mark out 'the body'" (3). What they propose is a critical approach to inter-embodiment that acknowledges the nearness of others while simultaneously recognising boundaries and distinctions that shape individual embodied experiences (7).

This emphasis on difference and boundary formation is further analysed in Ahmed's writings, including her critique of Merleau-Ponty's formulation of inter-embodiment in *Strange Encounters* (2000). She challenges the ease with which Merleau-Ponty moves from individual embodiment to a presumed collective "our". Ahmed warns that such universalising tendencies risk flattening difference and obscure how embodied encounters are always shaped by histories, orientations, and the particularities of social life. She writes:

> Rather than simply pluralising the body (there are many bodies), this approach emphasises the singular form of the plural: that is, sociality becomes the fleshy form (body) of many bodily forms (our). However, I want to consider the sociality of such inter-embodiment as the impossibility of any such 'our'. What I am interested in, then, is not simply how touch opens bodies to other bodies (touchability as exposure, sociality as body) but how, in that very opening, touch differentiates between bodies, a differentiation, which complicates the corporeal generosity that allows us to move easily from 'my body' to 'our body'. (Ahmed 2000, 47–48)

Ahmed develops this argument in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) by foregrounding sexual orientation as an axis of embodied differentiation. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of touch, she underscores how touch "also involves an economy: a differentiation between those you can and cannot be reached. Touch then opens bodies to some bodies and not others (107). Her model of orientation—spanning spatial positioning, sensory awareness, and relational alignment—dialogues with the project's emphasis on one's bodily awareness and differentiation. In *Are We Still in Touch?*, it is critically acknowledged that each participant's engagement is not defined by an abstract or universalised embodiment but emerges from orientations sedimented through their lived experiences, identities, and environments. Most importantly, the project implicitly invites participants to reflect on their ways of *being with* others while negotiating physical distancing and attuning to their own skin organ within "the skin of the group".

This inevitably raises ethical considerations, which, in line with Ahmed, I experientially and dramaturgically examine as "a question of how one encounters others *as* other (than being)" (Ahmed 2000, 138; original emphasis). As Ahmed explains, such an encounter is not with a generalised other, but with "a particular other, and the particularity of that other is not given in advance" (2000, 144). As she further notes: "Particularity does not belong to an-other, but names the meetings and encounters that produce or flesh out others, and hence *differentiates others from other others*" (2000, 144; original emphasis). The performance-workshop's emphasis on openness to emergent relations can thus be read as an enactment of this ethical framework: that to be with others differently is to remain open to the unknown particularity, and to the ways bodies are re-formed in and through each encounter. I elaborate on ethics as part of the project's approach to inter-embodiment in the section below. Video 4 and the writing in italics introduce the *Are We Still in Touch?* "rules" for participation.

Video 4: https://vimeo.com/1141672330

This is a non-judgmental space of invitations, not instructions, invitations. This means that I'm going to be inviting you, and you will be responding as you wish to; if you would like, to the extent you would like; mindfully, physically, both mindfully and physically.

Within my personal space, taking care of myself and taking care of the others; I can stay seated; I can stand up; I can stay on spot; I can move in the space. I can move a little; I can move a lot; I can stay still. I can have my eyes open; I can have my eyes closed; I can be somewhere in-between; in other words, you may be familiar with "I can have my gaze softened". You can look at me; you can move with me; you can copy me, if that makes you feel more comfortable; you can listen to me; you can just ignore me. Literally, whatever makes you feel at ease with yourself.

To reiterate, for as long as I take care of myself and I respect that every single person in this room is in their own process, it is my responsibility to respond to the invitations as I wish to. [I repeat this three times. The last time I point to the participants, so they echo the word "responsibility"]. I have been given permission. [I repeat again towards the echoing of the word "permission"].

As part of the study on how we encounter self and others differently, the performance-workshop introduces a set of ethical "rules" for self and mutual care. These "rules" are playfully presented as part of an interactive "game" and underpin the whole event. They are supported by elements such as first-person language and verbal-physical echoing. The use of first-person language within this dramaturgy addresses both my own somatic witnessing as a performer-facilitator and the

idiosyncratic "I" of each participant. This intentional blurring of roles seeks to encourage co-agency and invites participants to experience the space through their own embodied perspectives. The act of verbal echoing, particularly with words like "responsibility" and "permission", becomes a method of enacting these principles. It prompts experiential engagement within a shared ethical field. Crucially, these invitations are distinguished from result-oriented instructions. The goal is not to guide participants toward specific outcomes but to support their capacity to make informed choices about their participation.

Watching Video 4, you can observe how I introduce the "rules" in a playful tone, intended to support active and diverse participation. I shift into a more performative mode, expressed through both physical changes and vocal inflection. Using my body, I offer a generic physical articulation of what I am saying, redirecting my embodied focus, both mental and physical, from myself to the inclusion of the participants. This intention is heightened through the repeated phrases on "responsibility" and "permission", which are delivered slowly and rhythmically. The aim is to create space for participants to engage vocally, physically, and mindfully with these key embodied concepts through the filter of care and within the frame of the group's collective subjectivities.

I distinguish this introduction to embodiment in the performance-workshop through conscious engagement and a dynamic awareness of self, space, and others. Building experientially on Merleau-Ponty's discourse, alongside Ahmed's emphasis on particularity, differentiation, and plural inter-embodiment, I encourage participants to think through their different bodies as lived and shifting entities of relationality. Within the "rules", this approach is articulated as an interplay between mindful and physical engagement, as opposed to physical engagement alone, though the latter remains a valid and respected choice. However, such engagement may lead to a more mechanical or objectified relationship to movement. In contrast, I situate embodiment as a heightened state of attention that can arise when thinking, sensing, imagining, creating, and being-with converge. In this way, embodiment is not treated as a constant, habitual condition of *having a body* but as a chosen mode of presence, one we step into consciously, when ready and through various methods.

Ethically, I suggest that this framing cannot emerge from deterministic or result-oriented instructions. Instead, in my experience, participants' diverse and differentiated inter-embodiment can be supported through methods of somatically informed invitations. As part of a modified approach to somatic witnessing in the performance-workshop, these invitations require an attentive and adaptive mode of facilitation. They are designed to create possibilities for interaction without prescribing predetermined outcomes or expectations. At the same time, extending both Bleeker's and Midgelow's concepts, they invite a similarly "response-able" attitude from participants, fostering ethical awareness and mutual responsibility throughout the process. This mutual responsibility also aligns with the requirement for shared care, further connecting the practice to the discourse of "dramaturgies of care" (see Groves 2017; Stuart Fisher and Thompson 2020; Thompson 2023).

Unlike perspectives that position care solely in relation to the interests of those who are cared for (Groves 2017, 117), *Are We Still in Touch?* situates caring practice within the encounters between performer-facilitator and participants. A dramaturgy of care, according to James Thompson (2023), "is that careful and caring processes of *coming together* [which] are themselves aesthetically richer than those that might miss or fail to attend to the dynamics of the interactions between people and the quality of the relations that develop between them" (117; original emphasis). Within the context of the performance-workshop, aesthetics becomes a form of inter-embodied communication that is facilitated and somatically witnessed, yet not prescribed. While aesthetic generation is not the explicit aim, the quality of relational encounters inevitably gives rise to aesthetic experience. The intention is not to create synchronicity and homogeneity through physical imitation, but to offer a flexible structure that supports diverse interpretations. It is marked by tactile attentiveness that, when embodied, gives rise to effortless or unforced physical presence and interaction.

This aesthetics of caring togetherness also prompts dramaturgical development. For instance, the distinction between invitations and instructions—along with the "rules" section itself—emerged directly from participant feedback at the end of the first performance-workshop in November 2022. One participant expressed a need for rules on how participation could take form. In response, I introduced the frame of the interactive "game", listing a range of possible participatory modes as part of "being with" others in the practice. This strategy, grounded in my dramaturgical consciousness, acknowledged the feedback while preserving the project's non-deterministic intentions around somatically inspired invitations.

As a practitioner-researcher and performer-facilitator in this case study, I am conscious of several challenges posed by the framework of embodiment in the performance-workshop, the practice itself, and the discussed nature of the invitations offered. In alignment with the project's openness to the "not-yet-knowing" and its ethical commitment to emergent particularities, I remain critically aware that with each iteration, I meet different participants, offer a practice that may not land, and depart from expected formats or traditional workshop facilitation. This awareness enters into dialogue with Ahmed's framing of encounters, especially her emphasis on differentiation as fundamental to recognising particularity. Building on Levinasian ethics and Derrida's ethics of hospitality, she writes: "introducing particularity at the level of encounters (the sociality of the 'with') helps us to move […] towards a recognition of the differentiation between others, […] and the permeability of bodily space" (2000, 144).

In other words, reading my experience as performer-facilitator through Ahmed's notion of ethical differentiation, to approach the other is to remain open to an encounter that is not yet decided; one that is not simply a repetition of the same. This openness is not a form of generosity or hospitality that presumes the other must come into being. Rather, it reflects a recognition of one's own limitations: that the self is shaped through encounters with others. I am aware of the prominence of my role in the "bodily space" of these encounters, and that my invitations may still be perceived as instructions or as a form of controlling facilitation. Yet I can only be responsible for my own intentions and openness as I "hold the space", aiming to support the emergence of

each participant's differentiation. This includes my modes of inter-embodied facilitation and witnessing, which I analyse in relation to specific video moments in the following section, as well as my conscious shift into the role of witness towards the end of the performance-workshop.

Understanding differentiation through touch in inter-embodied dramaturgies

At this stage of the performance-workshop, participants are guided through the five principles of self-directed touch introduced to you in Video 1 and the opening practice: source of contact, points of contact, pressure, movement, and contact with the space. The prompt: *Can I distinguish which hand is touching and which hand is touched?*, grounds the exploration and aligns directly with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the human body as both sensible and sensate. Rooted in the lived experience of touch, Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002) notes: "when I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too" (106). In resonance, the five principles invite experiential engagement with the dual role of our bodies as both perceiving and perceived, aiming to foster the experience of tactile reversibility.

The ethical ground of these inter-embodied encounters can be summarised in what Merleau-Ponty describes as "the zero of pressure": "it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another" ([1964] 1968, 148). In the performance-workshop this "zero of pressure" is introduced in the prompt that invites no pressure between hands: *as if I touch the surface of water. As if I don't want to change something, as if I don't want to direct it [the point of contact], just be there*. It is inspired by the practice of *cellular touch* in IBMT, a hands-on method which aims at evoking a breathing space between relational points of contact by applying no pressure and visualising human bodies as entities composed of breathing cells.[8] Cellular touch supports the project's intention to challenge pre-determined assumptions in participatory practices. Its aim is to establish contact, especially self-directed touch, as a non-directive, spacious state, a condition through which diverse experiential possibilities may arise.

In dialogue with the discussed feminist nuances on inter-embodiment, the facilitation seeks to awaken diverse modes of philosophical "thinking through touch". While watching or re-watching Video 1, I would like to draw your attention to how this relates to embodied qualities in my facilitation—specifically, how my own engagement with the invitations influences the pace of my verbal input and enables a fluid continuation from one principle to the next. This consistent physical, mental, and verbal interrelation sets the tone for the unfolding of my encounter with the participants towards a shared experiential journey. Ahmed's ethical framework of differentiation and particularity also resonates with the language of the offered somatic invitations, as they prompt each participant to engage with the practice in their own way. This dynamic is reinforced using the plural "bodies"—rather than *the body*—and through the deliberate use of shifting pronouns "I", "we", and "you", which reflect the layered relationality of embodiment within the work.

Delving deeper into Ahmed's definition of temporal alignment and permeability in practice, the video offers insight into how inter-embodied dramaturgies and the methods of the performer-

facilitator can foster moments of alignment that honour individual particularities. It captures how active participants, even as they respond to the same tactile invitations, cultivate a shared focus or "embodied mind" that emerges from mutual engagement in the task. This inter-embodied alignment arises not from uniformity but from the distinct ways each participant interprets and enacts the shared prompts, contributing to a dynamic sense of togetherness. For example, during the section focusing on points of contact between hands, all participants follow the same prompt. However, their individual responses vary: some sit upright, others recline or lie on their backs, and their positions reflect their personal preferences or accessibilities. While some participants visually engage with their hands, others close their eyes, focusing solely on tactile sensation. These diverse responses illustrate how individual differentiation contributes to a shared interrelational experience, with the performer-facilitator's prompts creating a structure within which relational dynamics can unfold.

Fig. 3. Audience-participants' diverse engagement with points of contact between one's own hands. Are We Still in Touch? at Siobhan Davies Studios, London, July 2, 2023. Screenshot from the event's video documentation. Videography by Dominique Rivoal.

If you pause Video 1 at two minutes (see also Fig. 3), you will observe a diverse range of responses by participants. Notice the subtle differences between the two participants at the front left who engage with their palms, one seated in a kneeling position, the other lying on their back in grey-blue trousers. The participant in the kneeling posture holds their palms gently in front of their body, hands slightly cupped, with a steady, grounded focus. Their position and stillness suggest a contemplative or centring mode of attention. The participant lying down demonstrates a softer, more relaxed tactile engagement. Their arms float more gently, suggesting receptivity, as their body rests into the floor and cushion, amplifying a sense of ease. These qualitative differences

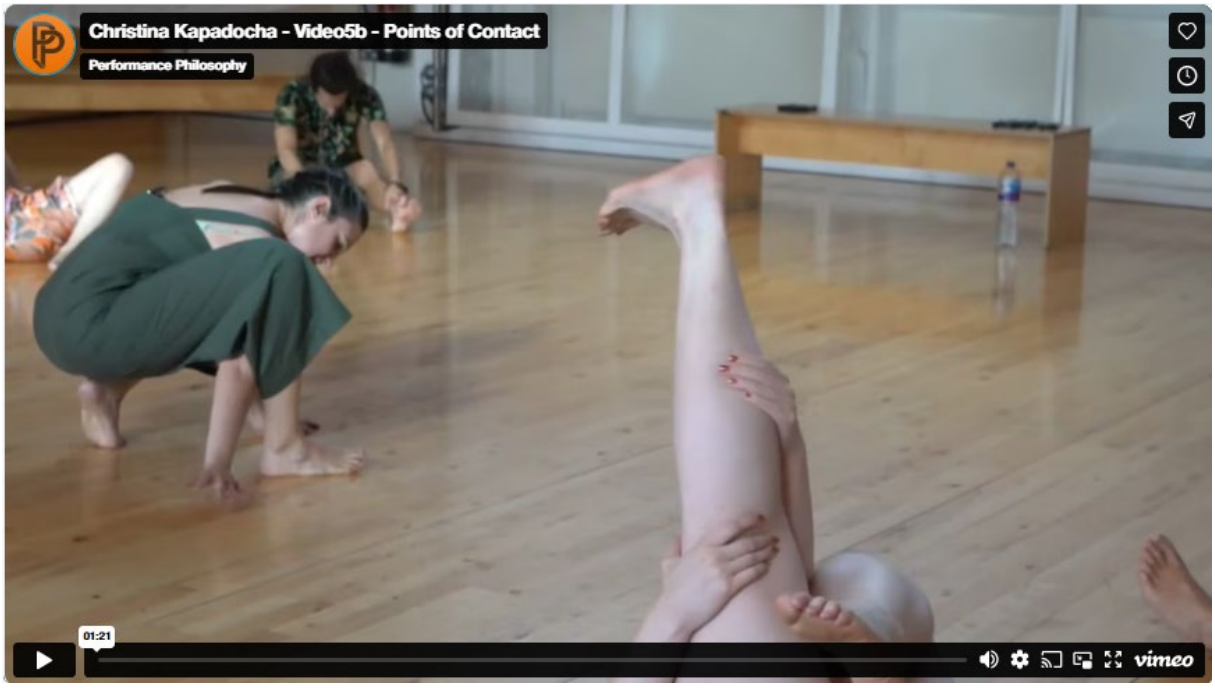
exemplify how shared facilitation can generate differentiated expressions, contributing to a collective experience that values alignment through difference.

In Ahmed's terms, this dynamic might be understood as the temporary surfacing of a "skin of the community", where bodies move towards and away from one another not through direct physical contact, but through shared affective and somatic attentiveness. At the same time, the somatic differentiation and distantiation, described in Ahmed and Stacey's definition of inter-embodiment, do not seem to encourage individuation as atomised or isolated subjectivities. Rather, the practice of self-directed touch in the performance-workshop appears to nurture moments where individual focus supports relational dynamics. Participants' individual explorations suggest a shared atmosphere of togetherness and manifestations of collective subjectivities. Such moments are visible in Video 5a, where unplanned inter-embodied echoing reflects not a loss of self, but a heightened sensitivity to others through the somatic cues of the shared space.

Video 5a: https://vimeo.com/1141672350

For instance, in response to the invitation for possible movement between participants' own hands, as shown in Video 5a, a collective physical echoing gradually arises between some of them. Observe in the video how three participants at the back and one towards the front lie on their backs, moving their hands as they extend them in front of their torsos. Notably, considering the principle of physical distantiation in feminist inter-embodiment, this shared echoing manifests not only among bodies in close proximity but also includes others positioned further away (at least the one participant visible within the frame). Notice as well how this echoing evolves into an "unchoreographed dramaturgy" between the four participants in proximity. This is not a direct physical interaction, but an indirect relational quality that emerges through each individual's attunement to their tactile experience as mediated by the facilitation. While participants remain

individually focused, their tactile engagement within a collective space seems to foster a dynamic sense of connection. Their distinct movements and explorations, shaped by common prompts, give rise to a nuanced alignment through difference further analysed in combination with the next video extract (Video 5b).



Video 5b: https://vimeo.com/1141672365

As attention shifts from hand-originated touch to more extensive body-to-body points of contact and then to body-to-space points of contact, Video 5b shows participants expanding their physical movements within the shared space. While remaining anchored in their individual processes, they begin to spatially respond to the shared context, softly breaking from the initial group circle and introducing diverse spatial positions and body shapes. This somatic shift illustrates that differentiation does not fragment the group but contributes to its inter-embodied cohesion, as each participant's curiosity and unique trajectory enrich the collective environment. The group's inter-embodied quality arises not from identical responses or direct attention to one another but from an implicit relational framework: each participant's particular tactile focus shapes and contributes to the collective experience. This reflects Ahmed's framing of skin not as a boundary of separation, but as a porous site of diverse relationality:

> [W]hile the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialisation of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others. (Ahmed 2000, 45)

Video 5c: https://vimeo.com/1141672380

Witnessing the practice in Video 5c, when the performer-facilitator prompts movement arising from both body-to-body and body-to-space points of contact, and eventually invites the integration of all five principles, you can observe that inter-embodied qualities further diversify. The participants' varied tempos and approaches coalesce into a group rhythm that is not uniform but inclusive of diverse expressions. This shared yet differentiated engagement cultivates an inter-embodied and caring mind, where the collective is informed by and reflects the particularities of its individual members. I propose that these tactile explorations lay the groundwork for the transition to the next part of the performance-workshop, preparing participants to engage as co-creators and co-performers in the evolving dramaturgical framework. At the same time, as captured at the end of the video, the performer-facilitator gains a moment to step outside the group, shifting into a witnessing role and attuning to how she receives the unfolding encounter before guiding the transition.

This cultivated inter-embodied consciousness now carries into the next phase, where participants move from individual exploration into overt performative participation.[9] Here, the prompts on self-directed touch become a foundation for collective co-creation within a shared dramaturgical framework. The following section focuses on this transformation through inter-embodied dynamics between participants and performer-facilitator, opening with an excerpt from this part's scripted narrative, which can be witnessed in full in the accompanying Video 6.

Video 6: https://vimeo.com/1141672390

Where is my skin? Where is my skin?/ is that skin? is that skin?/ can I sense it?/here it is/ in the rising and falling movement of my lungs/ the response of my skin as I breathe in and out/ it rises with the inbreath/it falls with the outbreath/the invitation is for you to follow that/even if it is a tiny movement/from your breathing/from this rhythm/ from the rising and falling of your skin/I'm with you.

I'm enveloped/I'm hugged by my skin/from my torso/to my arms, hands/fingers, fingertips/from my upper to my lower body/legs, feet, toes/how do you wish to respond to that?/moving your attention to the wholeness of your skin/the skin/the biggest organ/a moving, flexible membrane/the curiosity of my skin membrane/what does it want to tell me?/looking inwards and looking outwards/at small details and bigger surfaces.

Where does this journey want to take you?/ Touch?/body to body/skin to skin/my skin and the "skins" of my clothes/my skin and the "skins" of the space/the space that holds me/the skin that holds me/ I touch and I'm touched/I hold and I'm held/play with that/ temperature, pressure/different textures, different skins.

How about a touch that doesn't want to change/to direct/to push/to press/how about a touch that listens, sees/an interplay of the senses.

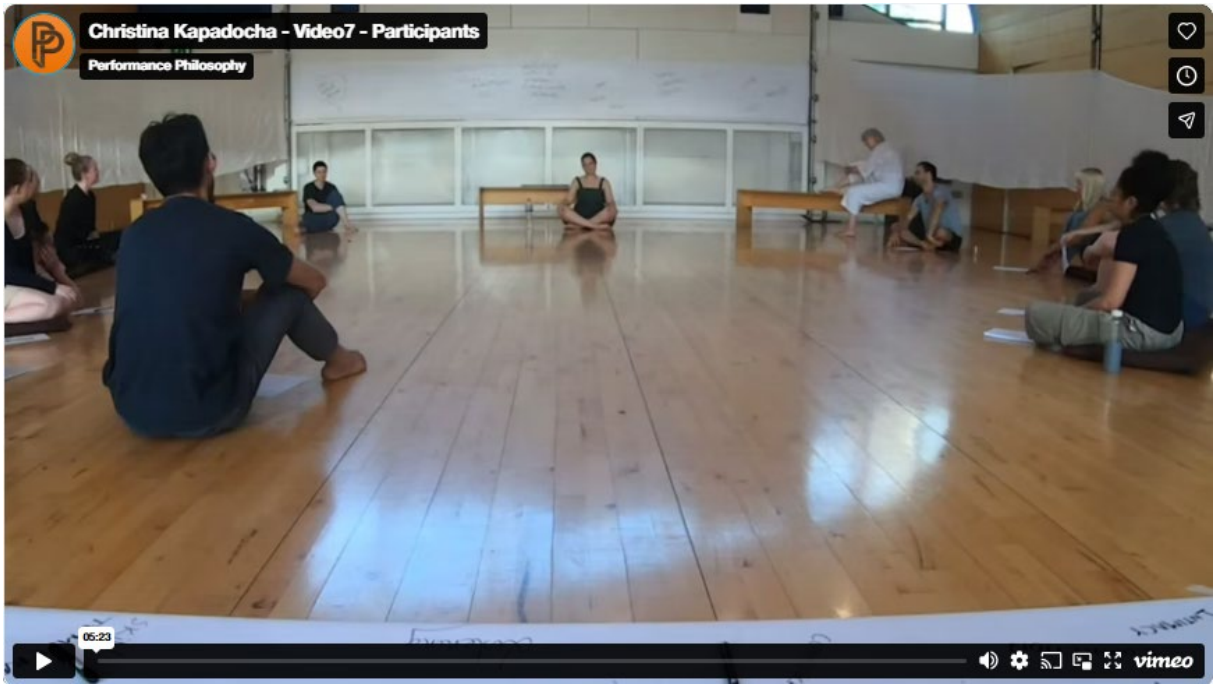
This extract opens the third section of *Are We Still in Touch?*, inviting active participants to a form of open co-performance. In my experience and reflection, it is the part that allows the fullest cultivation of dramaturgical consciousness and creative ideas for a latent participatory

performance as the participants are invited to freely integrate all the previously investigated principles. They have been informed of this step's performative nature in the event's introduction and have been encouraged to remain grounded in their own investigations as they receive the prompts in the text. The scripted text's poetic style, with its slashes and fragmented lines, reflects a rhythmic, free-verse structure intended to deepen the sense of inter-embodied dramaturgy and to further blend the roles of the performer-facilitator and participants. It also indicates how it was creatively developed drawing on the practitioner-researcher's reflective witnessing of videos on the project's online sessions held during the pandemic.

The performer-facilitator's role evolves into a state of heightened somatic witnessing, balancing a connection to her own experience with awareness and acknowledgement of the participants' touch-based differentiated expressions in the collective. This dynamic state is visually evident in the video through the performer-facilitator's somatic witnessing as physical and tactile echoing. Adding to the methods of touch-based somatic invitations, echoing in this part of the performance-workshop is the attunement of the performer-facilitator with the physicalities, chosen points of contact and movements of different participants while they co-perform in dynamic relation to the offered text. As demonstrated in the video, these interactions do not appear as direct imitation but as an attuned relationality that engages in a shared and inter-embodied "third" space. The echoing emphasises the different individuality of each participant's response through the presence of the performer-facilitator and supports the creation of an inter-embodied space where a collective dramaturgy unfolds.

Distinctive moments of this echoing include the performer-facilitator's shift from subtle to more active physical expressions, such as when she relates with a participant sliding on the floor, followed by a jumping impulse from another (01:53–02:10 in Video 6). There are also moments of resonance with a participant's physical state that unexpectedly attunes to the text, as when she lies next to someone and gently places her hand on the side of her lower back while they both begin to roll slowly (05:02–05:24 in Video 6). At 07:45–07:52, an "unchoreographed" synchronicity occurs: the participant in white brings their hands to their face, then elevates and lands on their heels at the exact same moment as the performer-facilitator. After completing the "monologue" section, she continues her somatic witnessing (09:32–end of Video 6), subtly echoing participants' actions before stepping back once again to the periphery of the group. She then provides time for written reflection, including the prompt for creative writing with the suggested opening "I touch and…".

The reflective section begins with participants being invited to share their creative writing, if they wish to, through their preferred expressive modes. In the final video extract (Video 7), performative reflections are chosen to suggest a continuation of the discussed inter-embodied dramaturgy. The performer-facilitator maintains a subtle verbal and physical echoing throughout to indicate her ongoing witnessing while recognising in practice the transformative shift in the roles between herself and the participants as performers. The section and Video 7 open with the following sharing:



Video 7: https://vimeo.com/1141672442

> I touch and I am restored. I map my body, and I paint myself into presence. I come into contact with the space through my skin and I blend with my environment; it's relational and there is only beautiful reciprocity. I paint on the canvas of the space with my living, breathing skin, and I come alive on a deeper level, somatically expanding out into an awakening, a waking up from mind trance. I let my body lead and do what it loves. It loves moving and dancing and coming into *contact with*, coming into *connection with*, coming into *relationship with*, so pure and innocent, this holy, sacred, sweet, loving connection; this sweet, loving conversation. I come alive again. Sunlight pours into my skin, hallelujah.

In the video, observe how the participant's spoken word is integrated with an expansive physicality towards the group and vocal excitement. In resonance but also differentiation, the following two participants choose negotiation with the space and the others, either moving towards the centre of the group (01:29–02:06 in Video 7) or its periphery (02:07–03:22 in Video 7), combining verbal and non-verbal expressions. The final reflection in the video (03:23–end of Video 7) features a participant wearing a GoPro camera, engaging in overt interactions with the group. They choose to move towards various individuals, coupled with attentive physical and vocal expressions. You can notice a quality of care and sensitivity in their awareness along with other participants' responsive openness.

Additional examples of creative writing from the same performance-workshop include:

> I touch and I feel.
> I feel love, I am love, I am excitement, excitement about life and more love.
> I feel safe.

I found a relation to others, a relation to others …
Intimacy happened.
I feel safe.

I touch and I connect. I touch and I remind myself that I am human.
I touch and I feel internally.
I touch and I understand. I touch and I belong.

The creative reflections are followed by open discussion, during which the theme of relationality remains prominent. In resonance with Ahmed's ethics of encounters, and broader principles of participatory research, this is something I can help cultivate but not direct, force, or manipulate. Over the course of seven different versions of the performance-workshop (November 2022-June 2024) held in various community, arts, and health-focused settings in London (Good Shepherd Studios, Women's Health Café, Siobhan Davies Studios, The LightHouse, and Gardens), insights have been gathered by seventy-two participants from different age groups and sectors, among whom health and specialist care workers, wellbeing advisors, artists, arts/movement trainers, educators, and therapists. The participants, among others, have shared a re-appreciation for the role of touch in fostering empathy and intimacy with others and have expressed connections with their groups despite focusing on themselves. In a recent iteration of *Are We Still in Touch?* for the 16th International Conference of Artistic Research on the theme of resonance (9 May 2025), a participant used the phrasing "collaboration with complete autonomy".

Towards other inter-embodied dramaturgies of touch

Returning to the project's research questions, it is evident that, within its framework, touch-initiated embodied awareness, even at a distance, can facilitate inter-embodied encounters and a sense of collective subjectivities. The praxical methodology of *inter-embodied dramaturgies*, as proposed in this article, extends the practice of dramaturgy into a realm where self-directed touch, indirect relationality, and somatic engagement are central. Participants' reflections show how this methodology expands beyond pure physical presence as participation; it engages with deeper layers of embodied knowing, awakening participants to the potential for transformation through somatic engagement and participation. This aligns with the philosophical contributions of the project, its grounding in Merleau-Ponty's reflexive notion of the flesh and Ahmed's focus on ethical encounters that negotiate differences, distance, and particularities.

The developed methodology contributes to understanding the experiences and dynamics of both participatory performance and research. It foregrounds the appreciation of ethical complexities inherent in participatory practices, as explored in *Are We Still in Touch?*, particularly through overlaps between the identities of performer and facilitator, the fused form of a performance-workshop, and the role of somatic witnessing in supporting care within dynamic embodied encounters. Inter-embodied dramaturgies build on embodied aspects of postdramatic approaches, such as those proposed by Bleeker and Midgelow, by emphasising relational and collective dynamics between multiple bodies. They highlight how meaning emerges through interrelational methods, underpinned by ethical principles, differentiation, and the negotiation of

proximity. These dramaturgies explore the shared yet differentiated subjectivities that arise in participatory contexts, fostering collective meaning-making grounded in somatic awareness, relational care, and emergent, processual interactions.

Based on the above, I propose that inter-embodied dramaturgies can offer pathways for social change through new modes of practice within and beyond performance settings. For instance, the methodology has potential to enhance inclusivity in performance and virtual, hybrid, or digital settings, where touch and proximity are mediated. It can also be adapted to accommodate diverse sensory needs, including those of individuals with visual or auditory impairments, supporting accessibility in participation. These possibilities were extended in the latest *Are We Still in Touch?* iteration for the artistic research conference, where a haptic setup generated voice recordings in response to tactile interactions between performer-facilitator and participants. This additional layer deepened the relational exchange and opened further space for inter-embodied dramaturgical consciousness.

The practice can also contribute across examples such as community engagement, educational contexts, health, and wellbeing spaces, where somatic inquiry can support collective and individual transformation. For instance, a later performance-workshop was held in collaboration with Sadler's Wells Community Engagement Team, as part of their Culture Club activities (19 September 2025). This programme was distinctive in its emphasis on inclusivity across body types, abilities, and ages above eighteen—with particular attention to people over 55—and its focus on encouraging participation, fostering togetherness, and promoting wellbeing through creativity. This collaboration exemplifies how community centres might incorporate the methodology into their programming to support creative and educational engagement.

Community-oriented exercises based on the discussed self-directed touch principles can be used to foster empathy and mutual understanding towards inclusive environments where diverse individuals engage in critical and creative self-reflection. Other applications could include therapeutic contexts, supporting practices of embodied listening, and relational attunement, empowering clients through a structured yet open-ended format that respects individual pace and agency. In educational settings, the work could be adapted to cultivate collaborative learning environments, where students develop interpersonal awareness and empathy by engaging in creative practices that highlight embodied presence and mutual support.

In summary, the methodology of inter-embodied dramaturgies, both as form and a set of principles, invites a reimagining of how we understand what "being with" others implies through participatory performance practices. It suggests that dramaturgy in participatory performance must always allow space for negotiating the particularities of different encounters, challenging predetermined structures, and being inclusive of diverse perspectives and experiences. By foregrounding somatic inquiry, relational ethics, and embodied differentiation, this methodology aims to contribute to the field of performance philosophy, offering a flexible, responsive, and inclusive framework for doing and thinking through performances.

Notes

[1] Please note that minor edits have been made to the written version of the original facilitation in this opening section to support the reading experience.

[2] For a concise overview of the wider PaR project From Haptic Deprivation to Haptic Possibilities, including its research activities and outputs, see https://christina-kapadocha.com/practice-research/from-haptic-deprivation-to-haptic-possibilities.

[3] For a concise overview of contemporary and expanded dramaturgy, see, among others, *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (2014), edited by Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane.

[4] On perspectives of embodied dramaturgy that foreground *the body* as a compositional element, see, among others, Stalpaert (2009), Hansen (2015), Maudlin et al. (2023).

[5] You can also watch the full length of the performance-workshop at Siobhan Davies Studios in July 2023 here https://youtu.be/B4UMtivdQtY.

[6] For instance, to support the first-person perspective in the practice's video documentation, a participant wore a GoPro during the session.

[7] Please note that the section outlined in this and the following paragraph is not included as a video excerpt here due to its primarily verbal focus. However, it is available in the full event recording (see the video link in note 4, 09:56–14:42).

[8] *Cellular touch* or contact at a *cellular level* in Linda Hartley's IBMT, develops upon the practice of cellular breathing in Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®), founded by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (2012, 158–162).

[9] I borrow the use of the term "overt" regarding audience participation in interactive theatre from Murray and Keefe (2016, 123–127).

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey. 2004. "Introduction: Dermographies." In *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, 1–17. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203165706.

Ahmed, Sara. 2005. "The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation." In *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*, edited by Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, 95–111. State University of New York Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074.

Bainbridge-Cohen, Bonnie. 2012. *Sensing, Feeling, and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*®. 3rd ed. Contact Editions.

Bleeker, Maaike. 2023. *Doing Dramaturgy: Thinking through Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08303-7.

Carter, Bernie, and Emma Meehan. 2020. "Bridges between dance and health: how do we work with pain?" *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Blog*, January 8. Accessed May 27, 2025. https://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/author/meehanemma/.

Groves, Rebecca M. 2017. "On Performance and the Dramaturgy of Caring." In *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy: Crossings and Conversations*, edited by Anna Street, Julien Alliot, and Magnolia Pauker, 309–318. Palgrave Macmillan.

George, Doran. 2020. *The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training*. Edited by Susan Leigh Foster. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197538739.001.0001.

Hansen, Pil. 2015. "Introduction." In *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, edited by Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison, 1–27. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hartley, Linda. 2004. *Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind and Meaning*. Whurr.

Heron, Jonathan, and Baz Kershaw. 2018. "On PaR: A Dialogue about Performance-as-Research." In *Performance as Research: Knowledge, Methods, Impact*, edited by Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude, and Ben Spatz, 35–46. Routledge.

Holmes, Sarah. 2023. "Racialized Bodily Grammar: A Case Study of White Fragility in the Embodied Discourse of Somatic Practice." *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 15 (2): 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp_00114_1.

Kapadocha, Christina. 2016. "Being an Actor / Becoming a Trainer: The Embodied Logos of Intersubjective Experience in a Somatic Acting Process." PhD diss., Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

Kapadocha, Christina. 2018. "Towards Witnessed Thirdness in Actor Training and Performance." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 9 (2): 203–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2018.1462248.

Kapadocha, Christina. 2021. "Somatic Logos in Physiovocal Actor Training and beyond." In *Somatic Voices in Performance Research and Beyond*, edited by Christina Kapadocha, 155–168. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429433030-16.

Kapadocha, Christina. 2023. "Tactile Renegotiations in Actor Training: What the Pandemic Taught Us about Touch." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 14 (2): 201–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2023.2187872.

Kramer, Paula. 2025. "Dancing with/in Atmospheres." In *Contingent Agencies: Inquiring into the Emergence of Atmospheres*, edited by Alex Arteaga, and Nikolaus Gansterer, 154–164. Hatze Cantz.

Leigh, Jennifer, and Nicole Brown. 2021. *Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods*. Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350118805.

Maudlin, Katy, Rea Dennis, and Kate Hunter. 2023. "A Mothering Dramaturgy: The Creative Co-practices of Mothering and Directing in Contemporary Rehearsal Rooms." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 43 (2):111–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2022.2137229.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1964) 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Edited by Claude Lefort. Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) 2002. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. 2nd ed. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610.

Midgelow, Vida L. 2015. "Improvisation Practices and Dramaturgical Consciousness: A Workshop." In *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, edited by Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison, 106–123. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137373229_6.

Mitra, Royona. 2021. "Unmaking Contact: Choreographic Touch at the Intersections of Race, Caste, and Gender." *Dance Research Journal* 53 (3): 6–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767721000358.

Murray, Simon, and John Keefe. 2016. *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315674513.

Nelson, Robin. 2022. *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90542-2.

Stalpaert, Christel. 2009. "A Dramaturgy of the Body." *Performance Research* 14 (3): 121–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160903519583.

Stuart Fisher, Amanda, and James Thompson, eds. 2020. *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*. Manchester University Press.

Thomas, Lisa May. 2022. "Employing a Dance-Somatic Methodological Approach to VR to Investigate the Sensorial Body across Physical-Virtual Terrains." *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 6 (4). https://doi.org/10.3390/mti6040025.

Thompson, James. 2023. *Care Aesthetics: For Artful Care and Careful Art*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003260066.

Trencsényi, Katalin, and Bernadette Cochrane. 2014. *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781408177075.

Walsh, Fintan. 2014. "Touching, Flirting, Whispering: Performing Intimacy in Public." *TDR/The Drama Review* 58 (4): 56–67. https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00398.

Biography

Christina Kapadocha (PhD) is a London-based theatre and somatic practitioner-researcher, founder of Somatic Acting Process®, and Lecturer in Somatic Acting and Research at East 15 Acting School. Her practice research and multimodal publications contribute to performance, voice and community praxis through somatically inspired methodologies. https://christina-kapadocha.com/

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

I LOVE *TO* YOU AND CUT *ON* ME: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF THE SURFACE

YU-CHIEN WU JOHANNES GUTENBERG UNIVERSITY OF MAINZ

Introduction

This article presents a dialectical debate among artists and philosophers by examining the act of wounding—both on the artist's skin and latex—in the performances of Franko B, SUKA OFF, and VestAndPage. I argue that wounds in these performances do not transmit trauma or pain as an inward, privately held experience; rather, they operate as hyperreal painfulness—pure representations that enact pain. This is contrary to Peggy Phelan's interrogation of the limits of representation where vision, love, and subjectivity resist containment by skin and form, making the wound a traumatic vanishing point for the unrepresentable. These visual portrayals of pain are independent of an autonomous subject undergoing suffering. The wound becomes an opening for encountering pain as a source of creativity and a mechanism of reversion, generating unforeseen possibilities. By turning "I love you" into "I love to you" through the addition of a preposition, Luce Irigaray (1983) advocates for the irreduciblity of each subject within relation, stressing the reciprocity and mediation so that both participants retain their subject positions without being appropriated. In contrast, in the order of simulation that Jean Baudrillard proposes, strategy belongs to the object, pushing the subject "back upon its own impossible position" (144). Despite their differences, Irigaray's use of the preposition "to" introduces ethical reconsiderations to Baudrillard's theory of seduction, showing how their ideas can complement one the other. The wounded surface takes on ethical weight beyond intention, desire, or will, through its seductive force, which is itself both relational and transformative.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):100–118
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101534
ISSN 2057-7176

Wounding as Painful (Hyper)reality

Bernadette Wegenstein devotes a chapter to "Body Performances from 1960s Wounds to 1990s Extensions" in her book *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*, where she examines the shifting role of the body in performance art alongside the evolution of media technologies. In her chapter, Wegenstein situates the "wounded" body of 1960s–70s performance within what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call the "*double logic of remediation*": the paradoxical desire to "multiply" media while "erasi[ing] all traces of mediation" (2006, 38). In happenings and actionism, this drive toward engineered immediacy takes the form of dissolving "the frame of spectacle"—integrating performance into everyday spaces and thereby blurring the boundary between art and life (Wegenstein 2006, 38, 49). Within this context, artists such as Gina Pane, Chris Burden, and the Viennese Actionists use their wounded bodies to confront the aesthetic and political norms, their wounds—despite the intended erasure of mediation by emphasizing sacrifice and authenticity—remain mediated. By contrast, the 1990s introduces another representational paradigm, in which, as demonstrated by artists Stelarc and Orlan, the body—no longer staged as a *raw material*—became a fragmented interface shaped by digital mediation. According to Wegenstein, this transformation reflects a broader cultural reconfiguration of the body—from a site of unmediated presence to "a disembodied frame, or a mere instance of mediation"—embedded within the logic of networked information flow (2006, 66).

Where the wound once symbolizes a rupture in artistic conventions, the body in the digital era is held together not by the entirety of its physical form, but by "the frame through which one experiences it" (Wegenstein 2006, 40). Thus, both the wound and the technological extension function as historically situated modes of mediation, shaping presence and absence, materiality and abstraction in and through the body. While Wegenstein's comparative focus maps the reconfiguration of corporeality across the two periods, this article approaches the wound from a different angle. I pick up where her analysis leaves off, tracing the persistence—and reinvention—of self-mutilation performances after the 2000s. By focusing primarily on the work of performance groups SUKA OFF and VestAndPage—in which acts of wounding are carried out on both skin and latex—I invite a rethinking of the relationships between pain and wound. To frame this inquiry, I draw on Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, in which the distinction between representation and reality collapses. This framing positions the wound as a surface that ensures the maneuver of painful (hyper)reality and, at the same time, enforces engagement from which ethical dimension arises.

SUKA OFF is a Poland based artist collective founded by Piotr Wegrzynski in 1995 and joined by Sylvia Lajbig in 2003. Their performance *Die Puppe* premieres in December 2010 in Katowice, the birthplace of Hans Bellmer. His booklet of the same name published in 1934 "contains ten black-and-white photographs of Bellmer's first doll arranged in a series of tableaux vivants" and a poetic prose introducing "his inspirational fantasies for the dolls and their origins" (Lichtenstein 2001, 22). These images obsessively expose disfigured pubescent female bodies, highlighting dismembered limbs and exposed cavities. As Bellmer confesses, the dolls are "an erotic liberation," a rejection of adult reality in favor of childhood fantasy (qtd. in Taylor 2002, 23). Susanne Baackmann observes that Bellmer's "photographic narrative unfolds the drama of the male infant in the throes of

castration anxiety," revealing both fascination with and fear of the female body (2003, 69). The fragmented or missing parts intensify this fear, functioning as both lure and threat. Whether through the exposed abdomen or the layering of female and male traits in a single body evoking the figure of the phallic mother, Bellmer's fetishism operates through a visual language of depth, seeking to penetrate and contain what remain elusive.

SUKA OFF's *Die Puppe* redirects Bellmer's fetish from depth to surface. In the 2015 version, as documented in performance footage, the performance begins with a table holding a tape recorder and a glass of red wine. Lajbig sits beside them, her head wrapped in bandages. Wegrzynski, dressed in a boiler suit and goggles, removes the tape and exits. Lajbig rises, walks to the back of the table, and slowly undresses, revealing a white latex suit clinging tightly to her body. She climbs onto the table, her striped stockings echoing Bellmer's signature imagery—the photograph *Striped Stocking* where a woman squats on a stool placed before a framed mirror. Yet, instead of psychosexual interiority, the scene asserts refusal of depth. Latex is beloved in fetish fashion due to its dual nature of reinforcing bodily boundary while "restricting access to it" (Steele 1996, 193), is used here, I suggest, to signify a resistance to the desire for penetration into the depth. Both performers have their vision obscured—Lajbig by bandages, Wegrzynski by goggles—mirroring what Sue Taylor (2002) calls Bellmer's crisis of vision: the anxiety of "seeing and not seeing" (40). From a Freudian perspective, the recognition of sexual difference in the Oedipal drama is mediated through sight, and SUKA OFF's staging suspends this recognition. The sealed opacity of latex stretches tension across the surface: depth is replaced by layers of skin.

Later, Lajbig returns to the table, still wrapped in white latex and wearing striped stockings. On either side of her hang two suspended head models, delicate and pallid, and slowly rotating. Two assistants enter. With wine glasses held by the assistants beneath her arms, blood flows silently, drip by drip, through long blood-collection tubes threaded along her skin. After the two assistants leave, Wegrzynski enters. He holds Lajbig from behind and rips open the latex over her chest and slipping water balloons beneath the latex. Her body does not flinch. Instead, she gently caresses the swollen surface, distorting her silhouette without any sign of pain or resistance. Then, with sudden force, Wegrzynski tears away the remaining latex from her chest. The balloons slip free, and her skin is revealed. What is exposed is no hidden essence, only one surface beneath another. The metamorphosis, condensed at the level of skin, becomes a pure play of tactile and visual effects. The peeling appears uncomfortable but not intensely painful; the bleeding, despite resulting from fleshy incisions, is not theatrically violent. What lingers is the question of where the sense of pain could be located.

VestAndPage, a performance duo founded in 2006 by German artist Verena Stenke and Italian artist Andrea Pagnes, integrates self-harm practices and blood rituals into their works to navigate the aesthetics of wounding on stage. In our interview, Pagnes emphasizes that the wounds in their performances are not intended as demonstrations of skill or spectacle, but rather as re-enactments of everyday movement within an anesthetized world. "As an artist," he asserts, "I collect images and recreate them" (Pagnes 2024). Regarding the creation of wounds in performance, Pagnes adds, "[w]hen you cut yourself, at the moment, you open up." Drawing on Theodor W.

Adorno's reading of mimesis in Gustav Mahler's music, Pagnes further explains: "[Art] seems to imitate the reality, but it does not. Mahler's music is an art of protest actually; it breaks through the reality to become protest. It is a cut." This notion of the cut as a disruptive opening—a mimetic fracture that does not imitate reality but pierces it—resonates with the poetic imagery of suffering in VestAndPage's performances. These images, I argue, stage a realm of the hyperreal in which painful sensation is not recovered but relocated. Through acts of self-harm, the duo critically interrogates "what 'authenticity' means in this century, a time where humankind's needs are increasingly artificial and induced" (Pagnes 2015, 1). They argue that "authenticity is not determined by anything prior," but rather "by the embodiment of the action—action made, filtered, and given back through the body of the performer, which makes the performer feel alive, and gives full meaning to their ideal of life as a human being" (2015, 12).

For me, this formulation calls to mind Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal—an order in which distinctions between origin and copy, real and imaginary, dissolve as simulation constitutes a world perceived as more real than reality itself.[1] In a world structured by simulation, representations no longer merely reflect or distort reality—they actualize it. In other words, hyperreality names this seamless emergence of a new form of reality in which mediated signs and embodied experiences are inextricably linked. Addressing common misconceptions of Baudrillard's concept, Rex Butler (1999) clarifies that "[t]he aim of simulation is not to do away with reality, but on the contrary to realize it, make it real". He further explains: "[s]imulation in this sense is not a form of illusion, but opposed to illusion—a way of getting rid of [the] fundamental illusionality of the world" (1999, 23–24). That is to say, simulation does not conceal some hidden truth; instead, it generates a reality that exists solely through appearance and enactment. Applied to the self-harm actions in VestAndPage's performances, they—as Pagnes writes—"liberate aesthetics from the justification of sacrifice," instead of aiming to represent pain per se (Pagnes et al. 2019, 267). Thus, the scenes of self-mutilation they create can be said to inhabit the register of the hyperreal—presence asserted through surface. Just as simulation realizes the real without recourse to illusion, VestAndPage's anesthetized imagery of suffering render real what they are: the surface of the act becomes the reality. They embody Pagnes's conviction that "only the act is true, for nothing that was ever said, is said, or will be said is truth" (Pagnes 2013).

This aesthetic logic finds concrete expression in *Panta Rhei VI: Time*, performed in Seoul, South Korea, in September 2012. In this piece, Pagnes presses a knife into his chest, his body sheathed in a nearly invisible layer of transparent latex. As the blade glides across the surface, no blood immediately appears. Meanwhile, in another part of the room, Stenke squeezes suspended plastic bottles filled with oily liquid, letting it spill over her body. As the slick substance spreads across the floor and her skin, she struggles to stay upright, repeatedly slipping and falling before eventually reaching Pagnes's suspended body. Cradling him, she carefully makes a tear in the latex and slowly peels it away, revealing a deep, visible laceration on his back. Both the oil and the almost invisible second skin—slick, glossy, and seemingly impermeable—initially appear to seal the body. Yet each breaks, through collapse and rupture, drawing focus back to the layer where perception takes shape without depth. In these moments, the surface becomes the site where reality is actualized.

Here, I interpret the act of wounding not as an expression of pain but as a hyperreal event in itself—a superficial appearance that exceeds the distinction between real and fake skin.

VestAndPage's self-harming performances are poetic, affective, and politically charged, yet they resist a logic that frames pain as an inner referent. This recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of private language in which he challenges the idea that sensations like pain can be meaningfully named in isolation from their socially learned expressions. As Claude Imbert (2012) explains, a central move in Wittgenstein's thinking is "the elimination of the concept '*pain*' to make room for pain *expression*" (266). Pain, in this view, is not a self-contained perception but is acquired through interaction and participation in shared linguistic practices. Wittgenstein refers to a child who, after an injury, cries out and is then taught by adults to express pain through language, remarking that "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" (§244). He extends his critique by imagining someone insisting that a picture of a pot with rising steam must contain something literally boiling inside (1958, §297). As Marie McGinn (1997) clarifies, the meaning of the "picture of a boiling pot" arises from how viewers respond to "the juxtaposition of the steam and the pot" rather than from any imagined content inside the pot (165). This understanding finds a conceptual parallel in Baudrillard's theory of simulation in which representations collapse into a reality that exceeds the distinction between sign and signification.

As Butler (1999) explains, in Baudrillard's thought, "no object has any meaning in itself but only in its relationship with other objects" (27). Wittgenstein (1958) similarly frames "signifying" in context, defining the "language-game" as "the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" so that meaning is produced through the "kind of use" a word has, not through any inherent essence it is assumed to possess (§8–10). Both Baudrillard and Wittgenstein reject the notion of an underlying substrate to which expression refers; instead, they conceptualize reality as constructed through processes of signification. If, as Baudrillard (1994) asserts, the hyperreal is "nothing more than operational" (2), then pain, within this context, emerges as an effect of wound imagery, an effect that, in my argument, constitutes the painful (hyper)reality in itself. In ORLAN surgical performances, she famously insists on "no pain" during or after the procedures (43). Yet as I watch the presentation slides during her speech—images of her incised, bruised, and swollen face—I feel an unease that persists. This disjunction between cognitive knowledge and somatic response supports Wittgenstein's insight that the "image of pain" is not a representational picture to be interpreted but something that "enters into" the ordinary use of "pain" as an immediate, "not replaceable" responsiveness (§300). He further argues that saying "I am in pain" does not "identify" a sensation "by criteria" but merely "repeat[s] an expression," which is "not the *end* of the language-game: it is the beginning" (§289-290). In this view, pain is recognized through its outward manifestations, not through verification of inner sensation. ORLAN's refusal of suffering does not negate the signs through which pain is culturally and visually registered, and the audience's response is shaped less by her verbal denial than by their encounter with the affective forms through which pain becomes intelligible. Her surgical and post-operative photographs, especially those showing her flayed face, produce the effect of pain much like the latex skin being torn discussed earlier: a wound, whether on skin or latex, creates a felt sense of pain.

VestAndPage. PANTA RHEI VI: Time. *Seoul Art Space, Seoul (SK), 2012. Photograph HeiJi Park. © VestAndPage*

VestAndPage. PANTA RHEI VI: Time. *Seoul Art Space, Seoul (SK), 2012. Photograph HeiJi Park. © VestAndPage*

Rethinking Wound with Baudrillard

Trauma, as both a psychic wound, and wound as the corporeal trauma, are used interchangeably in everyday language and theoretical contexts, functioning as metaphors for one another. In psychoanalysis, this symbolic interplay is exemplified by Sigmund Freud's reading of the myth of Tancred in Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. To capture repetition compulsion, Freud recounts how the hero Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a case of mistaken identity. After her burial, he ventures into a forest that fills him with dread. There, he slashes at a tree with his sword—whereupon blood seeps from the cut and he hears Clorinda cry out from within, lamenting that her soul is trapped inside and that he is wounding her again (qtd. in Freud [1920] 1990, 24). The bleeding wound on the tree emerges as a potent emblem of the rupture through which repressed memory returns—an image that captures the recursive nature of trauma. Embedded here is the proposition that what is concealed in depth can be heard only when the outer layer is cut open; that is, the wound appears as the external manifestation of an internal trauma.

This alignment between wound and trauma—as well as between trauma and imagined depth—is elevated to an ontological level in Peggy Phelan's book *Mourning Sex* where trauma becomes a metaphor for the structural failure of embodiment in representation. This failure confronts the epistemological desire—exemplified by the probing finger in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*—to penetrate the surface in search of interior truth. For Phelan, Caravaggio's depiction of Christ's pierced wound compels the viewer to recognize not a revealed interior, but a vanishing point—"a hole in the viewer's body"—marking what vision "cannot show, cannot see" (1997, 33). Though the surface appears torn open, this gesture toward depth yields no access. Instead, it

stages a confrontation with absence: "the visible hole the vanishing point gives us activates our attention to the holes we do not see" (1997, 36). As Phelan writes, "the skin suffers as it tries to contain the form of drama in which we love," since it "lacks the depth, the interiority, we want it to give us" (1997, 41). Christ's bloodless wound thus testifies not to pain made visible, but to the radical disembodiment of love and subjectivity—the moment where the body, like vision itself, resists full presence captured by representation (1997, 42–43).

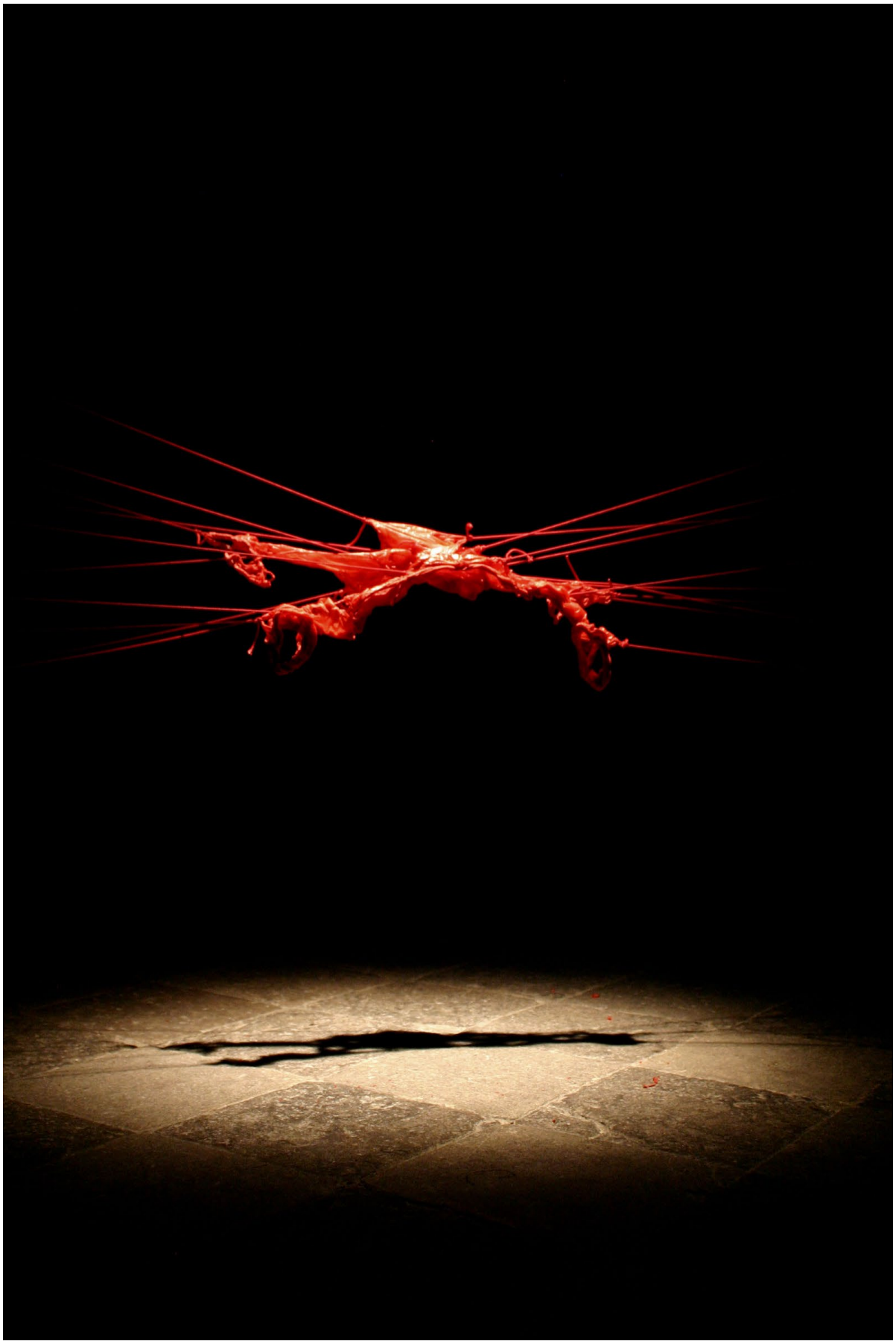
Phelan describes this failed search for interiority—endlessly reenacted across visual and embodied forms—as "the catastrophe of living (in) skin" (1997, 42), where skin functions as an interface through which subjectivity is mediated, yet inevitably frustrated. It bears the agony of insufficient embodiment. While Freud and Phelan both mobilize the wound as a metaphor for trauma—each invoking a relation to interiority, whether as a site of reemergence or an ungraspable disappearance—these framings risk foreclosing other ways of engaging with the surface's affective and relational potential in acts of wounding or bleeding. In what follows, I examine SUKA OFF's *Red Dragon* and Franko B's *I Miss You*, shifting the focus from the unbearable depth the skin can neither contain nor yield to the surface itself—where dripping blood, or torn latex, though visually evocative of trauma, arrests the viewer not through the compulsion of rupture or the lure of inaccessible loss, but through surface intensity: a seductive force that circulates affects, solicits painfulness, and occasions response.

SUKA OFF's *Red Dragon*, presented at the ARENA Festival in Erlangen, Germany, on June 2, 2011, stages a slow, emotionless and meticulously paced enactment of bodily transformation. The performance begins in near stillness: the male performer, Wegrzynski, sits silently on a red chair, immersed in red light. His entire body is covered in a thick layer of red latex, painted over itself five times to form a synthetic skin that clings tightly to his body. Under the saturated hue and taut latex, the contours of his face and body remain sharply visible—his features are sculpturally defined, his abdominal wrinkles pronounced, evoking the visual impression of dried blood on a flayed body. Female performer Lajbig is dressed in a long skirt of the same red tone, her upper body bare, and her face wrapped in red fabric—leaving only her eyes visible. She approaches him with deliberate movements; her gestures are composed yet intimate, exuding a sense of careful possession, infused with a lingering caress. When she touches his head, it becomes an assertion of quiet dominance, almost claiming him. The first incision is made on the right side of his neck, running downward toward his shoulder. Attentively, Lajbig slides her hand between the latex and his skin, creating a pocket of space. This action repeats rhythmically: she cuts a strip of latex, attaches a red string to it, and fastens the other end to the railing beside the chair. Piece by piece, his body becomes increasingly immobilized by the red strings. This sequence unfolds approximately over forty minutes with minimal variation, while Wegrzynski remains motionless throughout, fully subject to Lajbig's manipulation. The repetition builds a quiet yet escalating intensity as his latex skin is gradually stripped away, still attached to his body, and affixed to the space around him. Only in the final minutes does he begin to move, struggling against the latex to free himself from the fragmented shell. He exits the stage nude, his pale skin standing in stark contrast to the blood-red latex remnants suspended in his absence—an anonymous residue lasting where the body once was.

Watching a body peeled open from its second skin under an all-red mise-en-scène—red light, red skirt, red chair, and a layer of red latex—is, first and foremost, visually arresting. Even as I know the latex is not the performer's skin, I find myself momentarily caught in uncertainty, touched by the unfolding scene. I witness a shedding, a slow unveiling, yet no trace of agony or suffering is discernible. The body, drained of emotion, remains impassive, yet an underlying unease lingers. The act of being skinned in *Red Dragon* resonates with earlier visual traditions of flaying, particularly those centered on the myth of the Greek satyr Marsyas. As Claudia Benethien (2002) observes, Marsyas, in a series of sixteenth-century engravings, appears as an "interchangeable écorché devoid of identity" (78). By the seventeenth century, as seen in Giovanni Stradanus's *Apollo Flays Marsyas* (ca. 1580–1600), flaying becomes "an act of peeling something out of its (false) form," transforming skin into "a separate, second figure, an alien alter ego" (Benethien 2002, 78–79). In both cases, flaying is compellingly depicted as a painful, cruel and bloody act—foregrounding suffering as a visual and emotional register.

The act of shedding in *Red Dragon* is deeply sensational and affective. Yet, despite the visual motif of flaying, I question whether this scene of wounding necessarily demands to be read through the lens of trauma. While the wound undoubtedly produces a painful effect, as I have argued earlier, *Red Dragon* draws upon the visual lineage of flaying—such as the figure of Marsyas—yet stages a scene where affect emerges at the surface rather than from within any personal or traumatic memory. In one sequence, the latex covering Wegrzynski's face is stretched and distorted: the synthetic skin warps only partially, obscuring the contours of his facial identity. And yet, his features remain unreadable, denying access to either expression of pain or personhood. In my reading, the wound is not the spectacle of trauma, but rather a surface remnant of affective labor that holds, distributes, and captures the viewer through the force of its sensory presence. Before fully shifting away from trauma, I briefly draw on Jill Bennett's (2005) theory of affect in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* to foreground the dynamics engendered by sensory images—an approach that, while grounded in trauma-related art, highlights the "motility" of affective transaction "rather than its origins within a single subject" (10). This conceptual move away from the interiority of the subject serves as a steppingstone for the ethical foundation of my analysis, positioning the site of wounding or bleeding as a surface that compels response without relying on subjective intention. Bennett challenges a dominant strain in trauma studies that defines trauma as "beyond the scope of language and representation" (2005, 3) and, in contrast, proposes a form of philosophical realism that addresses art's capacity to convey embodied experience (2005, 3). For Bennett, affect bypasses narrative identification, enabling "a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work" (2005, 7). This encounter does not seek to communicate the meaning of trauma but instead prompts what "grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily," provoking thought and ethical reflection through what she calls "affective responses" (Bennett 2005, 7). Within this framework, she adopts affect as a means of relating to trauma—or to affective imagery that unsettles without placing the viewer inside trauma—by emphasizing how affect operates beyond bounded identification or representation (2005, 35).

SUKA OFF, Red Dragon *(2011). Photos courtesy of the artists.*



During the performance, tension accumulates through the repetitive peeling of layers, the slow incision, the binding gestures, and, finally, the exposure of pale flesh beneath. As Bennett argues, "affect is not pre-coded by a representational system that enables us to read an image as 'about trauma'" but rather induces "automatic responses" that, in her words, lie "not inside trauma" (2005, 35). As a viewer, I am immersed in the saturation of red as a sensory field that engulfs the body, without feeling the need for symbolic decoding. My breath quickens under the pressure of the scene; I am drawn into a charged space where shredded latex and repeated gestures build an atmosphere of quiet intensity, even though no one is physically harmed. Repetition within the dense red expanse and the ruptured, skin-like latex—juxtaposed starkly against Wegrzynski's bare flesh—collectively deepen the emotional impact of the performance. This intensification reaches a tipping point in the final minutes, when Wegrzynski begins to twist and tear himself from the red membrane that encases him. His restrained, affectless presence cultivates a tension that eventually erupts, spilling into a moment of instability: the red latex, now emptied and suspended, collapses into a limp husk. It remains on stage—an ambiguous object, resembling a newborn creature or discarded skin—contrasting Wegrzynski's body that exits. The final tableau conjures both aftermath and birth, culminating in a state of uncertainty. Lajbig, who has enacted a gesture of dominance, now appears to facilitate a metamorphosis—ushering a new being into existence. Yet the question of origin remains unsolved: the new creature appears to either emerge from Wegrzynski's body or precede and exceed him. The scene suspends the chain of becoming, leaving haunting questions: who creates whom, what holds power, and how affect is mobilized precisely at the site of a wound created by latex—where pain is not only simulated but felt.

I Miss You! is a live performance by Italian-born, UK-based artist Franko B, presented on March 30, 2003**,** as part of a four-day live art program at Tate Modern in London. The performance takes place in the museum's Turbine Hall where a long strip of white fabric extends the length of the space, transforming it into a runway-like stage lined with fluorescent lights. The audience is positioned on both sides of the runway, either sitting or standing, while a group of photographers gathers at the end, as if awaiting the next model at a fashion show. According to Tate Modern's performance documentation, the body presented on the runway is not a "slim body of a supermodel, but the completely nude, bald, stocky and eventually bleeding body of Franko B" (Gormley 2015). His entirely white-painted body conceals his tattoos and heightens the visual contrast with the blood. For about fifteen minutes, the artist walks back and forth along the catwalk-like canvas, blood trickling slowly and steadily from the cannulas inserted into the folds of each arm. As he moves in silence, the blood drips onto the fabric below, leaving behind a trail of red stains. At the end of each lap, he pauses briefly before turning, reinforcing the arranged visual and sonic rhythm of a fashion show, punctuated by the clicking of cameras.

In *Because of Love*, Tim Etchells (2018) references *I Miss You!* by describing Franko B's body as initially appearing "more as mere image than as a person—a sign or icon, spectacular, operatic," yet ultimately undone by "his eyes, breathing, and the bleeding itself, [which] all very much belied that iconic surface" (8). The blood that falls drop by drop seeps from controlled cannulas—an aestheticized release that neither guarantees visual violence nor implies unbearable pain. Yet, the slow leak from his body, its quiet porosity, insists on his aliveness. The contradiction Etchells

identifies—between the iconic image and the fragile human presence—becomes the threshold where a painful (hyper)reality takes hold. It is this unresolved tension between surface and substance, artifice and vulnerability, that draws in the audience. Jennifer Doyle (2006) experiences a similar affective pull. As she watches Franko's slow procession, she becomes unexpectedly worried: "Still, I thought, indulging the spectator's need to feel special—maybe Franko needs me." Her reaction extends beyond empathy; it emerges from a projection of care, identification, and a longing to be needed—an emotional entanglement requested not by the truth of physical pain but by the demand issued through its representation. As blood slowly traces a path along the white canvas, Doyle (2013) reflects that the scene resembles a wedding more than a fashion show—"a union with an absence, for an audience," enacted as Franko B walks down the aisle alone in a ritual of love and loss (83). "The scene was marital, but rather than celebrate the couple, we bore witness to the artist's isolation," she writes (2013, 76). Internal narratives take shape in response—"Love me, or I'll die. Love me, or you'll die. I miss you. You think you know what love is? I know. It is me bleeding for you (2006).

By presenting his white-painted body in the context of a fashion show, Franko B aligns himself with a longstanding tradition of using the body as a canvas, pointing to "a history of people who use a body as a canvas as a set of presentations and representations of what affects us – pain, love, lust, desire" (Ludmon 2003). His body does not cry out; it bleeds silently. It offers no confession, no catharsis, and no fixed representation. He does not confess, but *leaks*. This corporeal condition becomes the locus of an uneasy intimacy—a structural address. It compels not through dramatizing pain but through ambiguity: *Is this for me? Am I being addressed?* As Doyle writes, "[t]hat ambiguity is the very thing that seduces us—in our hearts we hold onto the possibility that someone might be crying for us" (2006). Where the red drops appear is a surface upon which blood is neither "a simple appearance," nor is what is lost or desired "a pure absence" but a site where absence "eclipse[s]" presence and vice versa (Baudrillard 1979, 85). Furthermore, the gesture of showing folds into a recursive dance of gaze, as positions—speaker/witness, requester/responder—shift fluidly in a scene where roles reverse before they ever stabilize. Doyle reflects on this disorientation: "[t]he risk one takes in the critical turn towards confession and autobiography is the reproduction of the lover's passive aggressive affection for her own martyrdom and suffering—in which case we simply mirror the position Franko B adopts before us" (2006). Her observation underscores how Franko B's bleeding entangles the viewer in a structure of desire and compelled response that precedes intention—an entanglement that is, at its core, seductive.

Ethical Dimensions of the Surface

In Baudrillard's theory, seduction marks the internal limit of the simulated hyperreal. The system of simulation sustains itself by continually reproducing differences—opposing others—so that its effect of "reality" is naturalized (Baudrillard 1994, 12). Yet no critical stance can be maintained from outside the system, as simulation steadily absorbs all externality and resemblances cease to be recognized once meaningful distinctions have collapsed. Butler addresses this paradox, arguing that the only way to engage simulation is to simulate it, to "double" the world hypothetically (1999,

73). This doubling, like a mirror, evokes a reflexive play in which a gap or distance can only be imagined, never verified. This, Baudrillard argues, is the play of seduction. William Pawlett (2007) elaborates that seduction, when operating at the level of meaning, "involves a play of appearance or surface, of signs that do not and cannot be related back to signified" (104). Meaning emerges anew—not through resignification, but in suspense, always ready to reverse. Victoria Grace (2000) describes this as "the reversion of signs"—a process that "annuls meaning through returning the sign to the immediacy of its site of action" (2000, 143). "Everything must respond by subtle allusions, with all the signs enmeshed in the trap," as Baudrillard writes (1979, 102). Discussing their use of latex, Pagnes reflects on its paradoxical nature, noting that it is a material secreted by trees to repair their wounds (Pagnes 2024). While it can heal, it also hurts; while it holds, it can break. The bleeding or wounded surface—performed on skin or latex—can be regarded as seductive, occupying the threshold where the reconfiguration of the wound's reality, reframed within the economy of the hyperreal, reshapes the understanding of pain. These surfaces seduce not through "a simple appearance" or "pure absence," but through what Baudrillard calls "the eclipse of a presence" (1979, 85).

There is, in Baudrillard's theorization of seduction, "*a duel and agonistic* relation" in which all parties involved are bound as participants in an interwoven dynamic (1979, 146). As he affirms, "[o]ne cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced," underscoring the mutual commitment and unilateral attraction central to seduction (1979, 81). Grace explains, "[s]eduction is a movement of reciprocal engagement, where each term is in play but never fully defined or fixable" (2000, 52). Being drawn into seduction does not mean that one ceases to be what it has been; rather, it marks the emergence of new ways of being in the world, shaped through the encounter with others. Grace continues exploring this notion later, deepening it as "implicitly a challenge in which each engages the other in a reciprocal obligation to respond" (2000, 145). Thus, to engage with the seductive surface—both for the performer and the viewer—is to be pulled into a political interplay of allure where response is inevitable and escape impossible. Such an encounter entails an ethical dimension, one defined by both compulsion and reversibility.

VestAndPage begins a cycle of performance project titled *DYAD* in various cities during 2014 and 2015. The project explores "what divides and separates us, and how divisions are applied socially and politically as mechanisms"; they "look into the dangers of dichotomy, attachments to dualism, and the paradox of Ego" (VestAndPage 2014–15). At Solyanka State Gallery in Moscow, they perform the *DYAD IX: Open and Closed* in 2015. In the midst of Pagnes' recitation, their bodies are enveloped in milky white latex, making them appear both human and non-human. As they gently caress their faces, the hands that stroke the latex surface seem to touch another person other than themselves. Pagnes kneels, while Stenke places her hand on his head. Slowly, Pagnes leans into her, resting his head on her chest, and she bends down to kiss his head. It appears they are gazing into each other's eyes, but the latex makes such a connection impossible. Sometimes they stand side by side, at other times they embrace, holding each other's hands. Through the torn latex, a sliver of skin on a finger is revealed. In this performance, there are no violent tears or bleeding wounds; the white latex both separates and connects their bodies, making them appear alike and serving as the link between them.

While I have discussed the wounded and wounding surfaces through seduction, certain features of this performance invite another theoretical inflection. Specifically, the dynamic between the two performers provides an entry point for incorporating Irigaray's preposition into the reading of seductive surface, framing it as an interval, which safeguards the other from appropriation. This performance is figurative in that it foregrounds the role of the surface—separated from but never independent of the body. Much like Irigaray's insertion of "to" into the expression "I love you," the latex becomes integral to the relationship between this "Jedermann" couple, who "confront their inner conflicts reciprocally and suffer through expressions of radical tenderness and unconditional love as an antidote to their suffering" (Pagnes et al. 2019, 274). For Irigaray, the "to" in "I love to you" functions as a guarantor of indirection, preventing relationality from collapsing into ownership or absorption and ensuring that the other remains irreducible (1996, 109). It preserves ethical interaction, maintaining a necessary distance that resists fusion and appropriation. Moreover, this subtle linguistic shift carries profound philosophical weight: "to" resists closure, refusing to collapse the space between self and other into possession or erasure. As Irigaray writes, "to" "maintains intransitivity between persons," marking speech and gift as acts of approach—"I speak to you, I ask of you, I give to you"—rather than appropriation (109). In this articulation, the preposition does not merely link subjects; it sustains a relational interval, a spacing that preserves alterity while enabling reciprocal proximity. The address remains open, directional but not possessive, allowing for response without subsumption.

In this sense, latex acts as a mediator—Irigaray's linguistic insertion—emphasizing both interdependence and the necessary space that enables intimacy without dissolving individuality. This point is restated in another metaphor of caressing each other that Irigaray depicts: "I caress you, you caress me, without unity—neither yours, nor mine, nor ours" (Jones 2011, 162). Rachel Jones (2011) contends, "[t]he spacing between the lips that allows woman to relate to herself thereby opens up a spacing between men and women that allows each to relate to the other without negation, assimilation, or appropriation. Instead, this spacing shelters an irreducible difference" (213). The surface, both linguistic and physical, becomes the site where relationality is enacted: a space of encounter that neither fuses nor fully separates, but maintains the dynamic tension of reversibility. VestAndPage often uses blood that Pagnes (2019) describes as "juice of life" in their performances (281). "Working with blood is a way of making connection," she explains in our interview. Blood, described in their own words as both a "carrier of suffering and an expression of life" is a material whose dual nature abolishes assigned meaning through a cycle of reversion (Pagnes et al. 2019, 284). As they state, "to sacrifice is also a way of becoming more consistent, compatible, and no longer in opposition to others. [It is seen] as an opportunity to inhabit a space where inner conflicts can be reconciled with external differences, re-establishing a more harmonious relationship between the Self and its opponents" (Pagnes et al. 2019, 274).

In a similar vein, the dialogue between VestAndPage and Franko B further investigates how love, and vulnerability give form to a space of interconnected exposure. Franko B reflects, "[l]ove is generosity. Love is kind—kindness from people you don't know. Love is why, I suppose, you get out of bed in the morning" (Pagnes 2021). Pagnes extends this, affirming that "we are all made of the same substance: love and suffering," and that art becomes "a quest for liberation pursued

through the inextinguishable power of love, radical empathy, and existential creativity" (Pagnes 2021). Their language of vulnerability and relational openness articulates a shared ethical orientation—one that embraces exposure as liberation, suffering as a site of connection, and love as a generative force binding creative impulse to empathy through a willingness to be affected. In this register, generosity is not a mood but a practice of risk: it invites contact, relinquishes mastery, and allows the self to be transformed by encounter. Their *being in the world* names a concrete hospitality—showing one's wounds to others beyond any contract. Reflecting on bleeding in performance, Franko B emphasizes: "it is not about Franko B. I am a human being in front of you, showing you what it is like—showing you life, really" (Pagnes 2021). Exposure here is not confession but a bodily address, where the other is invited to share and be accompanied. To show, then, is to witness rather than to claim; it keeps the relation open, refusing to turn the other into a proof, a prop, or a cure. Franko continues: "[t]he artist, I think a true artist, is one that is a monster, un mostro… from the Latin demonstrate, which is somebody that shows… 'This is what I saw, this is what is happening.' I think so, that is what is being vulnerable" (Pagnes 2021). Vulnerability, in this sense, is not theatricalized weakness but a lucid readiness to be seen—and to let seeing do its work. This is precisely the posture Pagnes names: "[a]ccepting our vulnerability means also [being] willing to stay open, show our wounds, accept our imperfection, and work on them, or make a work of art out of them" (2021).

In Irigaray's formulation, the preposition "to" institutes a structural distance that renders both unmediated fusion and the erasure of otherness impossible. I argue that this ethical spacing—irreducible and non-assimilative—underwrites the logic of Baudrillardian seduction: a gap that demands response while resisting incorporation. Even as Irigaray and Baudrillard converge on the necessity of relational distance, their philosophical trajectories diverge. As Grace observes, Irigaray affirms "the positivity of the subject—a feminine-specific, desiring subject" (55), whereas Baudrillard's non-essentialist critique suspends such affirmation, insisting that "the essence of the relation is as much to be questioned as the essences of the subject and the object" (71). What Irigaray frames as a political relation becomes, for Baudrillard, a reversible game in which "power can only be understood as challenge," sustained through exchange rather than fixed antagonism (Grace 71). This divergence need not be disabling. If we read Irigaray's "to" not as metaphor but as grammatical safeguard—an address—it becomes legible as the very structure of seduction: a challenge that inaugurates relation and obliges return. Butler's clarification helps align these perspectives: seduction is "not simply opposed to simulation," but a distance "that both enables simulation and ensures there is always more to simulate" (73). Because simulation offers no exterior vantage from which to refute it, one must engage it from within; this doubling is seduction's work. As Butler glosses, even when simulation attempts "to cross the distance between the original and the copy," seduction is both the instance that permits resemblance and the distance that resurges when it is crossed; "seduction is the necessity of taking the other into account when trying to produce resemblance" (72). Precisely here, Irigaray's "to" inscribes seduction as a relational distance—one that already presupposes the participation of the irreducible other.

In the performances this article examines, pain is not treated as residing in the artist's body and perceived by the viewer; instead, it crosses the boundary between the artist and the audience, shared as a hyperreal painfulness. This reconceptualization necessitates moving beyond the autonomous subject. Rather than aiming at the fulfillment of desire, love, for Baudrillard, thrives on indeterminacy where seduction manifests as a reciprocal invitation—"to be seduced is to challenge the other to be seduced in turn," a call to which a response is always already entangled (1979, 22). Arguing that challenge lies "at the heart of seduction," Baudrillard defines it as "that to which one cannot avoid responding" (1988, 57). In this sense, the wounded skin bleeds not to confess, nor to demand care, but to draw the other into relation—to reopen the body, marked by histories of domination, into a fissure, like the "to" Irigaray insists on, where signs, sliding over one another, and proximity, returning contours, together enable transformation to appear. Moreover, the blood that moves across Franko B's skin—an invitation to encounter that is grounded in vulnerability—finds a parallel in Baudrillard's conception of love, which he theorizes within the logic of seduction, distinct from the conception of sex as a biological drive, as "a challenge to the other to return the love," in which each side raises the stakes without closure (1979, 22). Blood, in the context, as a seductive surface, strains lure and love into tension, making the ethics of becoming-with inseparable from the allure of being-called. Thus, both the audience and the artist, enter a relation in which one accepts without being subsumed, responds without collapsing into over-identification, and stays with the shimmering interval where love persists.

As I have shown, the seductive surface—bleeding skin and wounded latex—is the mechanism through which painfulness is reimagined across biological and synthetic skins, thereby actualized as an intersubjective, painful (hyper)reality. At the site where wounds occur, an endless cycle of request and return emerges. Ethics appears as love continues to challenge without anchoring itself in an originative speaker or listener; no voice is centered, and none is appropriated.

Notes

[1] VestAndPage's use of the term "authenticity" is grounded in "true inner characteristics" and a "spontaneous and genuine interiority," with authenticity secured through coherence between inner disposition and outward action. Yet their account also concedes that authenticity is never assessed "prior," it is judged "by means of senses and knowledge" and is inflected by motivational and emotional state in the here and now where "sensorial information" received could be "incomplete, fragmented, and fluctuating" (Pagnes 2015, 12). My reading leans into this fault line: rather than treating authenticity as the expression of an isolated interior truth, I understand it as an effect that emerge through the relay between action, image and reception—close Baudrillard's notion of simulation as interpreted by Rex Butler that reality is not abolished by "realize[d]" (1999, 23).

Works Cited

Baackmann, Susanne. 2003. "Symptomatic Bodies: Fascism, Gender and Hans Bellmer's Dolls." In *Writing Against Boundaries: Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in German-Speaking Context*, edited by Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft. Rodopi.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1979. *Seduction*. Translated by Brian Singer. Editions Galilee.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Fatal Strategies*. Translated by Philippe Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, Jean. 1988. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Translated by Bernard and Caroline Schutze. Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra And Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. The University of Michigan Press

Bennett, Jill. 2005. *Empathic Vision : Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford University Press.

Bennthien, Claudia. 1999. *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Columbia University Press.

Butler, Rex. 1999. *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*. Sage.

Doyle, Jennifer. 2006. "Critical Tears: Franko B's *I Miss You*." *Franko B*. Accessed March 5, 2025. https://www.franko-b.com/critical-tears#publication.

Doyle, Jennifer. 2013. *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Duke University Press.

Freud, Sigmund. (1920) 1990. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Grace, Victoria. 2002. *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading*. Routledge.

Irigaray, Luce. 1996. *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*. Routledge.

Imbert, Claude. 2012. "Pain: A Philosophical Borderland." In *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Jonathan Ellis and Daniel Guevara, 259–276. Oxford University Press.

Jones, Rachel. 2011. *Irigaray: Toward a Sexuate Philosophy*. Polity.

Lichtenstein, Therese. 2001. *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*. University of California Press.

Ludmon, Mark. 2003. "Franko B Pushes Live Art to Bloody Extremes." September 24. Accessed April 2, 2024. https://markludmon.com/2003/09/24/feature-franko-b-pushes-live-art-to-bloody-extremes.

McGinn, Maria. 1997. *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*. Routledge.

ORLAN. 2010. *ORLAN: A Hybrid Body of Artwork*, edited by Simon Shepherd. Routledge.

Pagnes, Andrea, and Franko B. 2021. "How to Live Because of Love? Andrea Pagnes in Conversation with Franko B." October 8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKOJ0sQ6HDU.

Pagnes, Andrea, Felipe Henrique Monteiro Oliveira, Amber Rose Ellis, and Aisha Ryannon Pagnes. 2019. "Considerations on Pain and Suffering in VestAndPage's Performance Art." *Repertório* 22 (32): 266–300. https://doi.org/10.9771/r.v1i32.26578.

Pagnes, Andrea. 2013. "My Body Asking Your Body Questions: Interviewed by Valeria Romagnini & Karlyn De Jong." *Personal Structures* 2: 281–296. https://www.vest-and-page.de/interview-personal-structures.

Pagnes, Andrea. 2015. "Two Bodies in Space: The Quest for Authenticity in the VestAndPage Experience." *Research Catalogue*. Accessed March 8, 2023. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/206891/206892Two.

Pagnes, Andrea. 2024. Interview by Yu-Chien Wu.

Pawlett, William. 2007. *Jean Baudriilard: Against Banality*. Routledge.

Phelan, Peggy. 1997. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. Routledge.

Steele, Valerie. 1996. *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, And Power*. Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Sue. 2000. *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*. MIT Press.

VestAndPage. 2014–15. "*Dyad.*" https://www.vest-and-page.de/dyad-cycle-2014-2015.

Wegenstein, Bernadette. 2006. *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*. MIT Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Macmillan.

Biography

Yu-Chien Wu is a researcher at the Institute of Film, Theatre, Media and Cultural Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz. Her research explores wounding in performance art, using surface as a conceptual lens through which understandings of the body, gender/sexuality, and sensation are reexamined within broader debates on authenticity and cultural representation.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DRAMATURGICAL POTENTIAL: IS IT NECESSARY?

MISCHA TWITCHIN GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

> It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished.
>
> Louise Glück (1993, n.p.)

> The effect comes about without making a name for itself.
>
> François Jullien ([1994] 2004, 94)

> What is actually hard to shake off is the classical terminology that turns the power of tradition into aesthetic norms.
>
> Hans-Thies Lehmann ([1999] 2006, 28)

The title question of this essay is itself a kind of manifesto, suggesting a particular way of thinking through the appeal of and to dramaturgy—as between its necessity and potential, where this may indicate the "power of the unfinished" (Glück 1993). After all, the "it" in question is, perhaps, not "dramaturgical potential" but an indeterminate reference—any element in a performance—for which this very potential concerns the necessity of what is questionable. To ask of any such element "is it necessary?" is not to define it in terms of a design or plan (which it is understood to serve) but, indeed, in terms of its potential. The question (of this necessity) is not simply applied to a particular element but arises from it—beginning, then, not with "why" it is necessary but, rather, "how". While the sense of *why* can be addressed endlessly at the level of an idea, the sense of *how* concerns what is to be learnt from material presence in action through a manifold sense of the "pragmatic". As will be explored in this essay, the relation between action and potential in an understanding of dramaturgy concerns the translations (or translatability) through which the question of necessity may itself be explored in its potential as distinct, for example, from an appeal to the "power of tradition" (Lehmann [1999] 2006)—whether philosophical or theatrical.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):137–149
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101533
ISSN 2057-7176

Informed by my teaching experience, this title question is both practical and conceptual; not least, in terms of the translatability of the very word, dramaturgy, where the resonance of the Greek, in its vernacular assimilation, lends a canonical aura to its (being) thought.[1] This appearance of a "classical terminology" for performance making in modern European languages—as if *theatre* means the same thing today as in ancient Athens—easily becomes (as Hans-Thies Lehmann notes) an idiom of and for the unthought or the "applied", as if referencing something already known. Even as it echoes the terminology of the European philosophical tradition (not least, that of "the philosopher", as Aristotle was called in the Middle Ages), dramaturgy raises its own questions for thinking through the theatrical. Here the question of necessity broaches that of its own potential in (and as) the work of translation, framing the encounter in teaching with the material(s) of students' practice.

While dramaturgy might seem at times to be as exhausted as claims to "aesthetic norms", Lehmann is himself the author of one of the more successful attempts to breathe life back into its European practice, with the advocacy of what he identified as "post-dramatic" theatre or performance (Lehmann [1999] 2006).[2] It is in relation to this terminology that the epigraphs to this essay (which function, perhaps, as elaborated keywords) are cited as a chance to explore a sense of the "unfinished" in questions of (and for) the potential of dramaturgy, as the work (verb) in and of a work (noun) or "drama". (This relation might also be explored through what distinguishes "process dramaturgy" and "production dramaturgy".) With respect to its terminology, this essay is concerned in particular with the translation of Greek terms (as indexing potential concepts) in which the very word "dramaturgy" is itself inscribed. More specifically, how might such terminology admit the translatability of certain Chinese terms for thinking (through) dramaturgy; not least, then, as a reflexive concern with the potential of that translatability? Translation here works to indicate the "limits" of a practice that may be understood in terms of the incomplete or "unfinished", as putting in question an appeal to "classical terminology".

As an example of a broader conceptual "turn", the contrasting "logic" of Chinese terms brings into focus the classical terminology of European dramaturgy, where the translatability of the former requires critical reflection on the very terms through which they might be translated (or thought translatable). The French Sinologist, François Jullien introduces the "illuminating logic" (1995, 13) of the Chinese term *shi*, for instance, as an indication of "perceiving reality as a process of transformation", with the mutual potential (or "efficacy" [1995, 16–17]), rather than opposition, of the static and dynamic. He observes that:

> The logic of *shi* could even pass beyond peculiar cultural perspectives and thereby illuminate something that is usually difficult to capture in discourses: namely, the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things. Instead of always imposing our own longing for meaning on reality, let us open ourselves to this immanent force and learn to seize it. (Jullien 1995, 13)

It is this orientation by (and towards) "the disposition of things" that informs the particular sense of "pragmatics" (*how*) in the question of (and for) dramaturgical potential here (distinct, at least in the first instance, from *why*).

This term *shi*, Jullien (1995, 13) notes, "does not figure amongst the major concepts (the "Way", *Dao*; the "organising principle", *li*; etc.) that provided themes for Chinese thinking", and its very ambiguity in and for translation unsettles the system of categories (particularly of binaries) with which the classical terminology of European philosophy is traditionally thought. Jullien reviews the use of *shi* in different fields of action—from military strategy to calligraphy—to elucidate its manifold efficacies, which is to be explored here as a question of and for the "necessity" of dramaturgy. The limits (or limitations) of classical (Greek) terminology are tested or experimented with by a question of the translatability of *shi*—where, precisely, this *potential* is not reducible to European discourses of "power" and its enactment, still less the "completion" of its idea(l). As we shall see (with Roland Barthes), this becomes a question of what it means "to breathe" in the work of dramaturgy.

In the unfolding (or translation) of potential, how might evoking the "power of the unfinished"—as the Nobel Prize winning poet Louise Glück does—offer an occasion for thinking anew about the "work" or "task" of drama (dramaturgy [*drama-ergon*])? That is, working on or with "drama" or dramatic action(s); on or with the structures that render action(s) "dramatic"; not to mention their translation into gestural, scenographic, *theatrical* action(s) or performance(s).[3] What is "unfinished" in this work (as in its concept), played out between (its) theory and practice; that is, in the translatability between the one and the other? In exploring the potential (or power) of the "unfinished" or incomplete(d), how might dramaturgy be reconceived when it does not aim, for example, to align relations between elements and structure with those between means and ends, as this "classically" orients expectations of a performance's intelligibility? (After all, this model of intelligibility need not, as Lehmann recognised, be one to which any particular performance aspires.) The sense of the whole as a condition of and for the potential or "propensity" (*shi*) of any part would aim at a dynamic conception of production rather than a static closure or completion of this (mutual) relation. As Jullien writes of Chinese landscape painting: "It is crucial to achieve *shi* because the reality of things only exists—and thus only manifests itself—in a totality, through the force of propensity that links its various elements as a whole" (1995, 99).

How, then, might this "power" open up, for example, a question of "chance"—that is, in the potential of its very necessity (Twitchin 2020; 2018)?[4] And how might "potential" (indeed, the potential of potential; or the work of a work) offer a key to practising dramaturgy—not as the application of a theory, but rather (with the experimental sound-artist Pauline Oliveros) as a chance for practising practice, for the practising of (a) practice? After all, the very task of dramaturgy involves the question of what may be understood by "drama", rather than supposing it as already the idea (*eidos*), or aim (*telos*), of that very task (*ergon*). The potential of the work (*ergon*) broaches the question, then, of "performance philosophy", the manifold of which gives its name to this journal, after all.

While it may be said of a performance that "it has potential", this is usually to say that its potential is as yet unrealised. Indeed, to say that a work is "unfinished" is often a way to damn it with faint praise. This is to re-affirm the Aristotelean entelechy as the "proper" (or "actual") understanding of a work (in its dramaturgy), as if this were the necessary vector of its translation from "idea" to "production". (As we shall see, such an "end" is not a condition of and for understanding in the *Tao*.) There are, of course, material conditions that all too often make the potential of performances unrealisable or ineffective (not least, in their idea); but this may also indicate something that remains uncompelling or unconvincing in the work. I would like to suggest that this concerns a failed sense of necessity, of what is necessary to the action(s), both in their composition and in their very performance; that is, in recognising their potential. How, then, might questions of dramaturgy (presupposed by those of its translatability) pre-empt (or even preclude) simple necessity—in exploring, precisely, that potential?

Taking up the theme of Roland Barthes' 1977–78 course at the Collège de France ([2002] 2005), the latent "of" in practising practice would here be *neutral* between the terms it connects, whether of (that is, between) theory and practice; or verb and noun. As a question of and for exposition, Michael Taussig (2020, 12), for instance, makes the neutral (with reference to Barthes' seminar) a point of orientation for the paradox of a "mastery of non-mastery": "But doesn't outsmarting mastery perpetuate mastery, if only in another form? This is what leads Barthes to say that *the neutral* refuses to dogmatise because the exposition of the non-dogmatic cannot itself be dogmatic. This poses the problem of exposition." This neutrality between both senses of its "subject" in practice is, then, distinct from being a fulcrum between (or even a diagnosis of) one term that is primary and another that is secondary.[5] In this context, Oliveros' (2022, 58) acute formulation is resonant: "The practice generates theory. Theory is perceiving structure—analysing and explaining structure so that testing and experiment (practice) can be done. Theory directs practice and creates culture to practice practice." "Theory" and "practice" are themselves vernacular assimilations of a "classical terminology", of course, with changing meanings such that they cannot be taken simply as translations of *theoria* and *praxis* or *techne*. What kind of *poetics*, after all, is already supposed in and by the manifold translations of *dramaturgy*, as this may be exposed by a reading with, for instance, the *Tao*? Indeed, what kind of exposition is necessary to the manifold potential of such (a) reading?

Distinct from the title of a career path within (or even outside of) institutional theatre making, how might dramaturgy realise this neutrality (with Barthes) in becoming an effect "without making a name for itself" (as Jullien suggests)? Or, perhaps, in the thinking (practice) of such dramaturgy: "How, we may ask, can the neutral be detectable, how can it manifest in a particular way?" (Jullien 2008, 49). How might the particular remain potential (rather than "finished") in this sense of "testing and experiment" (Oliveros), where dramaturgy touches on the agency of "nonaction" (*wu wei*) in the *Tao*, in the "way" that is evoked by both Jullien and Barthes, as also by Martin Heidegger? Heidegger (1982, 92), for instance, evokes the translatability of the *Tao* (as both "way" and "saying") in contrast with the expectations of "reason… meaning, logos": "Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying conceals itself in the word 'way', Tao, if only we will let these names return to what they leave unspoken, if only we are capable of this, to allow them to do so."[6]

Might the sense of continuous transformation (or "propensity" [*shi*])—distinct from an applied purposiveness—offer the seeming paradox of a dramaturgy without "drama"? Neither "post-dramatic" nor "undramatic" (in the sense of something lacking, as Lehmann already exposed it), but as a kind of "wisdom"? Indeed, risking the ignorance of appropriation, rather than the questioning of translatability, is this to engage with what one might, perhaps, call the *Tao of dramaturgy*? Such a "challenge… to the Aristotelean rules of structure" is, indeed, proposed by Barthes ([1982] 1991, 185) in a discussion of Cy Twombly, through an analogy between painting and theatre in the name of the "wisdom" of art. Barthes writes, "I should like to question Twombly in relation to the Event" (177)—which he parses in five instances of a "classical terminology" that leads on to an invocation of the *Tao* and an ethics of "non-mastery" at the end of his essay.

Exploring the contemporary resonances of these five instances, which Barthes gives in Greek, for addressing "the event" (at least, with respect to Twombly's analogical "theatre"), Barthes speaks of what animates the artwork through, precisely, the framing of this very analogy: "What happens on the stage [*sur la scène*] proposed by Twombly (canvas or paper) is something which participates in several types of event, which the Greek vocabulary clearly distinguished: there occurs a fact (*pragma*), an accident (*tyché*), an outcome (*telos*), a surprise (*apodeston*), and an action (*drama*). (Barthes [1982] 1991, 177). No one term in this constellation of "occurrences" is privileged over the others (presenting a dramaturgy of, or as, "the event" in its various "kinds"), where the appeal of (and to) *drama*—still less that of and to *telos*—neither explains, nor is itself explained by, any one of the other terms. The theoretical aim to explain is not then complete(d) in practice, but rather admits the potential of and for chance (*tyché*); or what one might call the motive or potential of the "unfinished" (or, indeed, surprise [*apodeston*]), in its "challenge" to an Aristotelean terminology. In terms of the latter (as the premise of that "challenge"), this entails de-coupling *energeia* from *entelechy*; as also a formal cause (*eidos*) from its final cause (*telos*). This gives a dramaturgy of what matters (*pragma*), of material practicalities, rather than ("necessarily") ideas or forms. The fact of an action becomes a matter—a question—of its necessity, rather than its idea (or explanation).[7]

Reference to any particular element in or of a "drama" or action—distinct from acting (*mimesis praxeion*)—is neutral as to the work (*ergon*) of its event when conceived of in terms of assemblage, rather than the traditional, hierarchical ordering of such elements. Indeed, as Jane Bennett (2010) notes, introducing the Chinese sense of *shi* (with reference also to Jullien), "[a]n assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it" (34); where "*shi* names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it" (35). Admitting this "configuration", even in its latency, rather than attempting to pre-empt the sense of "any particular element" by design (as if it should be already manifest), is key to a neutral dramaturgy; one that does not try to pre-determine what is necessary (in the sense of and for the "agential") but which allows for its processual manifestation or emergence. The "vitality of the materialities" (of "elements" in their relation), even if parsed in terms of Barthes' five categories or distilled into the singular question of necessity (*Ananke*), remains *potential* (or "unfinished"). The translation of this in practice is the concern of a *way* of understanding (or practicing) dramaturgy in its neutrality. Bennett continues her evocation of *shi* by making an association with the idea of "adsorbsion" from Gilles Deleuze, as an occurrence or "a gathering of

elements in a way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agential impetus of each element" (35). Here the dynamic of assemblage finds a "formal" materiality, for instance, in the work of collage.

While the terminology of Barthes' analogical dramaturgy is introduced in the "classical" language of the Western philosophical canon—Greek—it serves to displace the question of the artwork from, precisely, the canonical sense of the "complete(d)"; that is, from the traditional form of its *telos*, its "dramatic" purpose(s) or end(s). The sense of what the work is supposed to be (usually as a means of understanding what it is "about") pre-empts, precisely, what remains potential. In "classical" Western drama (whether tragedy or comedy), this famously takes the form of a "catastrophe", an ending in which structure and morality are intertwined to evoke a sense of the inevitable consequence of actions or of a protagonist's destiny. The paradoxical "surprise" (commented on by the chorus in ancient tragedy) is "classically" due to a background "drama" between the gods that defines the protagonist's field of action. (As the blinded Gloucester says in *King Lear* [IV.i.36–37]): "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.") And in the Christian era, it is the background consequences of original sin that are manifested through the "example" of what is enacted as the dramatic failure of (a) "character".

The necessity revealed by the agential in "classical" drama concerns motive rather than material. Here the dramaturgical work evokes character—*ethos* (in Greek)—rather than the vitalities (or chance) of an assemblage of actions in their potential (*shi*). The story of exemplary death (however attenuated) retains the fascination of a "character" flaw (*harmatia*); of something (or someone) that is "unethical" in action. Here aesthetic and moral norms are intertwined in a residual Aristotelean poetics that can often still be seen in newspaper obituaries of the famous. (Unfortunately, students of the *Poetics* today are rarely tasked with also reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*; even as, paradoxically, they may be expected to read Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* or *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.)

In contrast to this heritage of explanatory "reversal" in the dynamic of Aristotelean dramatic form, Barthes' essay on Twombly ends—without concluding—by citing the *Tao*. This opens up what might be thought of as familiar (even in reference to ancient Greek) towards what may be thought of as philosophically unfamiliar, even as it is written into the essay, by contrast, in French (or here in English) rather than the literal "characters" of Mandarin (Tsu 2023; also John Wu's translation [1989] of the *Tao* with the Chinese text facing the translation). The relation between translation and transliteration in this conceptual dramaturgy attests to the occlusion of writing at the heart of logocentric questions of "drama"; not least, in reflecting on the concept of dramaturgy itself (in its potential translatability). Concerning the non-appropriative ethic of Twombly's work (addressing the art not the artist), Barthes' "unconcluding" essay proposes:

> If we wanted to situate this ethic, we could only go looking for it very far away, outside painting [as also, then, outside theatre], outside the West, outside the historical period [that is, the Western paradigm of classical-and-modern], at the very limit of meaning… with the *Tao Te Ching*. (Barthes [1982] 1991: 194)

As noted at the start of this essay, with Jullien, one such "limit of meaning" (whether in French or in English) is that of the translatability into—and, indeed, of—an understanding of both "potential" (*shi*) and the "neutral" in the *Tao* for a Greek-derived conception of dramaturgy (as the work of drama); as if the "ethical" question could be abstracted from that of *pragma* (or of metaphor from materiality); at least, in "post-dramatic" performance.[8] Here it is important to keep in mind that the proposed "challenge to Aristotelian structure" is articulated through an insistence on (and of) Greek terms, as Barthes evokes this "limit" and an "outside" within their European understanding, including (here) in the translatability between French and English. The non-appropriative ethic of the incomplete(d), or unfinished work, entails a dramaturgy that is also, as it were, "inapplicable". Just as theory is not applied to practice, as if it were an explanation (or even a prescription), nor is dramaturgy (in the *Tao of dramaturgy*) an applied practice (as distinct from an example of practicing practice).

In reply to an observation made by Nadine Savage, in 1979, that he "often use[s] Greek words or neologisms with the accompanying comment that the French language needs 'supplementing'", Barthes explains:

> I don't have in mind the French language in particular… language forces us to speak in a certain way and stops us speaking in another [and] if I feel a French word doesn't fully express what I want to say—being deficient in its connotations or cultural richness—then at that point I use a foreign word—a Greek one, for example—a word that's relatively freer and less compromised by use. (Barthes 2023, 118–19)

Introducing the idea of Greek words as an example of the "supplementary" (as well as of the "foreign")—lifting the language of analysis out of being simply an instrument of and for an explanation of its subject (when the very language of that analysis becomes its own subject)—is perhaps not as obvious as it might seem, even in the context of "performance philosophy". Behind such ("less compromised") use as neologism, the Greek terms (transliterated into Latin script) offer an interruption of the expected meaning or usefulness of a word (in French or English), "challenging" its everyday communication by not relying simply on what is supposed to be already understood by it. In another register of this "supplementing", however, the attempt to engage the translatability of Chinese terms does perhaps remain "less compromised by use" (at least, currently); not least, in association here with questions about how we learn to think of performance making through a European (or "classical") understanding of dramaturgy.

In the same interview with Nadine Savage, for instance, Barthes replies to her question, "Can you talk a bit about your interest in oriental cultures?" by observing that:

> Factually speaking, it's absolutely clear that a Westerner can't have genuine access to Far Eastern cultures for linguistic reasons… The East functions, then, as the Other of [our] thought, and we need (at least it's necessary in my intellectual life) a sort of oscillation between the same and the other. What I'm able to glimpse of Eastern thought, through very distant echoes, gives me a chance to breath. (Barthes 2023, 123–24)

This metaphor of a "chance to breathe" is oriented, then, by the potential of translatability from the Chinese, touching on a non-appropriative ("inapplicable" or "undramatic") ethic. All this concerns a conception of dramaturgy (as neutral) that is not already "compromised" by a means-ends schema, with its corollary ideas of action ("drama")—represented in logocentric "acting" (as *mimesis praxeon*, the imitation of actions)—and the associated organisation (practices) of theatrical work, with its standard division of labour between actors, designers, directors, writers, and even dramaturgs. This set of technical "applications", some of which are attributed, in the embarrassing "professional" jargon, to "creatives" or to the "creative team" (which does not usually include philosophers or theorists), aims to contain or channel the potential of assemblage, diminishing the surprise (or even wisdom) of not (already) knowing the whole of a production. Institutionally, the "power of the unfinished" (coded as "failure") becomes effectively taboo; or, at least, unthought as accident rather than chance (Twitchin 2018).

The question of translation here concerns not simply the "foreign" words (and their concepts) to be translated, but the potential understanding of the language into which they are being translated—that is, the displacements that admit that translatability in the self-understanding of (in this case) a contemporary European language (in relation to both ancient Greek and Chinese).[9] The work (*ergon*) of translation (*metaphorein*)—concerning what "drama" might mean—evokes the metaphors that spin out from, but are also knotted into, a concept that is always "unfinished". Translation, after all, offers the potential of thinking through the sense of assimilating or appropriating meaning(s), while holding open a simultaneity that allows for "testing and experimenting" (Oliveros), without one possibility "necessarily" precluding another. This is key to collage and, then, fundamental to concern with the potential of the neutral for re-thinking dramaturgy in the name (or translatability) of its concept, as it is addressed in the work of reading the *Tao* in the West (beyond the now canonical reception of, for example, John Cage and Merce Cunningham [1988]).

Regarding the understanding of what is "potential" (in regard, for instance, to "Aristotelean rules of structure"), François Jullien (2004, 1) poses the question: "To what extent have we ever stepped outside that European schema or are we even able to—can we even question it ('we' within the European tradition who still perpetuate those early Greek categories)?" The question is indicative of the "chance to breathe" evoked by Barthes, unsettling a conceptual schema that is "so thoroughly assimilated that we no longer see it" (ibid.). Crucially, Jullien explores how the Greek schema (that of and for dramaturgy in this essay) construes the sense of "potential", where our "classical terminology"

> set[s] up an ideal form (*eidos*), which we take to be a goal (*telos*), and we then act in such a way as to make it become fact. It all seems to go without saying—a goal, an ideal, and will: with our eyes fixed on the model that we have conceived, which we project on the world and on which we base a plan to be executed, we choose to intervene in the world and give a form to reality. And the closer we stick to that ideal form in the action that we take, the better our chances of succeeding. (Jullien 2004, 1)

As already observed, in the West, "potential" is often registered simply in the sense of what is lacking to the "[un-]finished" work. Potential is latently manifest in the "unfinished", in the sense of the work not (yet) being good enough—where the goal (*telos*) of its form (*eidos*) remains unrealised or ineffective. In "what seems to go without saying", dramaturgy is often seen, then, as a handmaid to the supposed "success" of a performance, understood as a relation between (ideal) form and (its) aim or goal, as this is invested in the recognition of a "finished" production—distinct from "the chance to breathe" (or, as I have discussed elsewhere, the chance to fail [Twitchin 2018]). Such an understanding (made manifest in dramaturgical judgment) is reconceived in the "inapplicable" way (*Tao*) of a relation between the theory and practice "of" each term, understood not through their abstraction but in the fact (*pragma*) of their "necessity".

Such practicing practice—a theoretical practice and a practical theory—is undefined by appeal to a "method" (or a prescriptive "poetics"). As Jullien (2004, 33) writes: "The 'way' itself (the *dao*), as conceived traditionally in China, is a far cry indeed from our Western method (*methodos*, which is a 'way' to be 'pursued' that leads 'towards' something)". In this context, it is interesting to note that the observation previously cited from Heidegger (1982, 92) concerning the translatability of the *Tao* (or way) continues: "Perhaps the enigmatic power of today's reign of method also, and indeed preeminently, stems from the fact that the methods, notwithstanding their efficiency, are after all merely the runoff of a great hidden stream which moves all things along and makes way for everything. All is way."

The neutral is not, then, a dramaturgy that could be applied; nor a technique that measures its own effectiveness by defining the work in terms of that very applicability—but, rather, one that admits (or works with) surprise (*apodeston*) in the acknowledgment of chance (*tyché*). As Jullien, again, writes:

> Instead of constructing an ideal Form that we then project on to things, we could try to detect the factors whose configuration is favourable to the task at hand; instead of setting up a goal for our actions, we could allow ourselves to be carried along by the propensity of things. In short, instead of imposing our plan upon the world, we could rely on the potential inherent in the situation. (Jullien 2004, 16)

It is this potential (recognised through a neutrality "of" dramaturgy) that re-orients the question of necessity as to the "matter" of drama (or of "actions").

When something doesn't matter in a performance, after all, it remains inert, merely ornamental (or even didactic), whatever the claims about the (supposed) idea that it represents or enacts. If there is no ("pragmatic") use for an element then it is dramaturgically redundant (or unnecessary), present without potential ("the chance to breathe"). Here one could make a comparison with puppetry or object theatre, where precisely the question of animation concerns that of the necessary potential of "breathing" with regard to the relations between the elements in performance. The latter are understood as literal "characters" in a pragmatic assemblage distinct from a logocentric interpretation of acting and the classical "ethics" of its dramaturgy. A neutral dramaturgy, by contrast, attends to the significance of the fact (*pragma*) as much as the

signification of the idea(l) (*eidos*). Here the question of form is no longer addressed as if it were beyond (as an explanation of) the sensible—as if this were a condition of and for rendering the latter intelligible.

What "matters", then, is to admit or to recognise what is *pragmatic* in performance making, as the necessity—the potential—of its *eidos*. To explore or discover what matters in and by means of dramaturgy (its work) concerns the paradox of an incomplete(d), unfinished, "telos". This is characteristic of that seeming oxymoron, the "theatre-idea" (Badiou [1998] 2005), an idea that is effectively the drama (or event) of performance *making* with the "wisdom" of the neutral. The practice is understood, precisely, in its practice—not in an application from outside itself (as "theory"), mistaking its necessity with what is normative (as "drama"). How many times has one heard the judgment (criticism) that a work is not (yet) "a play", "dramatic", "finished", where the question of the pragmatic is transformed into that of an idea(l) rather than being held open to wonder what the work is potentially? As Deleuze (1997, 135) acutely observes, regarding the difference between judgment and (new) modes of existence: "What expert judgement, in art, could ever bear on the work to come?"

A neutral dramaturgy, then, would engage with the principle (posed here by Alain Badiou) that "theatre-ideas" are essentially realised "on stage"—and not in the minds of performance makers (or dramaturgs): "To establish—as we must for every art—that theatre thinks.... Theatre-ideas arise in and by the performance... and do not pre-exist [their] arrival 'on stage'" (Badiou [1998] 2005, 72). Understanding that performance is not secondary to another source that is primary (traditionally, a dramatic text to be "interpreted") is, of course, fundamental to the "post-dramatic"—as thus to the neutral as a "way" [*Tao*] of understanding or working with a "post-dramaturgical" practice, as (of) performance making, in its potential "necessity".

"Dramaturgical potential" here concerns assemblage as a displacement of the authorial by the question of what is *necessary* in and for a performance. What holds attention rather than distracts it—in practice ("on stage"), rather than in its being explained (off stage)? The question of "necessity" reorients a sense of the *what* of a performance in terms of *how* it is performed, exposing the dynamics of, for instance, vulnerability or resistance in the materials, as a question of what *matters* ("pragmatically") in and for the attention of both performer and audience. What is necessary in telling a particular story, then, is specific to that very "telling"—the agential emerges through the refraction of each by the other. In making a performance, for instance, what is specific to a glove used (to evoke, for example, an experience of touch), whether made of latex or cotton, a surgical or knitted glove; or, perhaps, a marigold? Or the kind of glass placed on a table—a champagne flute, an ordinary wine glass, a tumbler, a schooner or a shot glass—as they associatively evoke a location or an event, whether a restaurant or a home, a gathering or a solitary scene? What are the properties (or pragmatics) of these elements (to unravel, to break, to tear, to shatter) in their affordances for the hands or as a source of sound? The telling detail is already the potential of what is to be told. Material and metaphor offer their mutual potential in any particular instance, rather than the one necessarily subsuming ("explaining") the other.

The question of "the event", as the scene of and for Barthes' "non-appropriative" poetics with the *Tao* (in the analogy between Twombly's art and theatre), is the occurrence of the "theatre-idea" (rather than the dramatic text). Evoking again that key term for a neutral dramaturgy—assemblage (as a "configuration" in which "*shi* names the dynamic force" [Bennett])—and summarising all that has been historically recognised as "post-dramatic", Badiou ([1998] 2005, 72) specifies that "[theatre] is the assemblage [*agencement*] of extremely disparate components, both material and ideal, whose only existence lies in the performance [*représentation*], in the act of theatrical representation." As a final example here of the inscription of translation in the "limits" of its concept ("dramaturgy"), this last phrase is the translator's interpolation to gloss the manifold sense, philosophically, of *représentation.* In this understanding, not only is "the performance… evental" but—particularly as concerns the "art of theatre", rather than simply commercial entertainment—it is "an event of thought"; that is, of the necessary potential of translation or translatability in thinking through (practising) dramaturgy.

> As the *Laozi* remarks (section 41), 'A great work puts off completion' (a better reading than 'happens in the evening'). As we have seen from modern painting, setting a high value on a preliminary sketch makes it possible for *what appears to be lacking in it* to allow the work to continue to evolve and to produce an effect; the unfinished element is what keeps the effect active. (Jullien 2004, 108–09)

Notes

[1] A brief account of this teaching, from which I have been privileged to learn, is shared in Anna Furse's *Performance Making* (Furse 2025, 99–102). In this book, Furse reflects on the project of her MA Performance Making course at Goldsmiths, University of London, and I am very grateful for having had the opportunity, over many years, to contribute to it. This began at a time when universities were not as ruthlessly managed as they are today in terms of a politically mandated marketisation. As Furse trenchantly observes:

> Across the UK, the cost of refashioning universities into businesses has proved disastrous for creative disciplines. For all the 'values' cited to support and justify restructured and leaner/ fitter institutions, the jargon promoted by university managements against which academics are expected to measure and justify ourselves speaks explicitly of an identity crisis: the university is no longer defined by its educational expertise and research-rich orientation, but is now understood as a management-defined body, demonstrated in a wholly new insidiously euphemistic vocabulary seeping into paperwork, together with the augmentation of the administration on university payrolls…. (Furse 2025, 11–12)

[2] As will be seen later (with Alain Badiou) the term "performance", as an index of and for the translation of key terms between Anglophone and other European research, is part of the background of these reflections. It should be stressed, however, that my essay does not seek to offer a review of works in which the manifold potentials of dramaturgy have been discussed (even by Lehmann)—and in relation to which the thoughts here may sound like a rather weak echo.

[3] It is notable, for instance, that in his entry on dramaturgy in the *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Eugenio Barba (1991, 69) refers to "actions at work" without using the term "drama" at all, even as he carefully distinguishes between "written text" and "performance text"—or what he calls "scenic bios".

[4] This is already to displace the question of natural and accidental causes in Aristotle, for example, to a comparison

oriented rather by the sense of "dynamic" manifest(ed) in the *Tao Te Ching*.

[5] The neutral was recently adopted by Will Daddario and Harry Wilson (2023) for a reading of Barthes and I am grateful to them for giving space to my earlier reflections on this theme, as an exploration of the Barthesian "oblique" (Twitchin 2023a).

[6] Heidegger's interest in working on a translation of the *Tao Te Ching* with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao in the 1940s is discussed in the latter's essay in a volume on "Heidegger and Asian Thought", where the contrast with "Aristotelean logic" is again remarked (Hsiao 1987, 99).

[7] I have explored this in an exposition of "a dice thrower" as a figure of and for performance philosophy (Twitchin 2020).

[8] I have discussed this material-metaphor relation in the example of costume in the work Tadeusz Kantor (Twitchin 2023b).

[9] I have discussed elsewhere the parable of this given in Jorge Luis Borges' story, *Averroes Search* (2000), regarding the translation of, and commentary on, Aristotle's *Poetics* from Greek into Arabic in the context of "making" performance (Twitchin 2019).

Works Cited

Badiou, Alain. (1998) 2005. *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. Stanford University Press.

Barba, Eugenio. 1991. "Dramaturgy". Translated by Richard Fowler. In *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. edited by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, 68–73. Routledge.

Barthes, Roland. (1982) 1991. *The Responsibility of Forms*. Translated by Richard Howard. University of California Press.

Barthes, Roland. (2002) 2005. *The Neutral*. Translated by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier. Columbia University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 2023. *Simply a Particular Contemporary: Interviews, 1970–79*. Edited and translated by Chris Turner. Seagull Books.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623.

Billeter, Francois. 1989. *The Chinese Art of Writing*. Rizzoli International.

Borges, Jorge Luis. 2000. "Averroes' Search". Translated by James Irby. In *Labyrinths*, edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, 180–88. Penguin.

Cunningham, Merce. 1988. "'The I Ching and Me', a conversation with Nancy Vreeland Dalva." *Dance Magazine*, March, pp. 59–61. https://mercecunninghamstudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-I-Ching-and-Me-A-Conversation-with-Merce-Cunninhgam-Nancy_Dalva.pdf.

Daddario, Will, and Harry Wilson, eds. 2023. *Rethinking Roland Barthes Through Performance: A Desire for Neutral Dramaturgy*. Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350330870.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1987. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel Smith and Michael Greco. University of Minnesota Press.

Furse, Anna. 2025. *Performance Making: A Pedagogy for Precarious Times*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003424147.

Glück, Louise. 1993. "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence." *The American Poetry Review* 22 (5): 30–32. https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Disruption%2C+hesitation%2C+silence.-a014375024.

Heidegger, Martin. 1982. *On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter Hertz. Harper & Row.

Hsiao, Paul Shih-yi. 1987. "Heidegger and Our Translation of the Tao Te Ching." In *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, 93–104. University of Hawai'i Press.

Jullien, François. 1995. *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Zone Books.

Jullien, François. 2004. *A Treatise on Efficacy*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. University of Hawai'i Press.

Jullien, François. 2008. *In Praise of Blandness*. Translated by Paula Varsano. Zone Books.

Lao Tzu. 1989. *Tao Teh Ching*. Translated by John Wu. Shambala.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. (1999) 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Edited and translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088104.

Oliveros, Pauline. 2022. *Quantum Listening*. Ignota.

Taussig, Michael. 2020. *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226698700.001.0001.

Tsu, Jing. 2023. *Kingdom of Characters*. Penguin Books.

Twitchin, Mischa. 2018. "What Chance Failure?" In *Beyond Failure: New Essays on the Cultural History of Failure in Theatre and Performance*, edited by Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki, 37–54. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351247733-3.

Twitchin, Mischa. 2019. "In and Out of the Dark." *Performance Research* 24 (4): 142–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1641337.

Twitchin, Mischa. 2020. "A Dice Thrower." In *The Routledge Companion to Performance Philosophy*, edited by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca and Alice Lagaay, 326–329. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035312-37.

Twitchin, Mischa. 2023a. "Baffling Dramaturgy." In *Rethinking Roland Barthes Through Performance: A Desire for Neutral Dramaturgy*, edited by Will Daddario and Harry Wilson, 157–170. Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350330870.ch-011.

Twitchin, Mischa. 2023b. "Kantor's Encounters With a Rhinoceros: 'Costumology' Between Material and Metaphor." *Studies in Costume and Performance* 8 (1): 11–34. https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00083_1.

Biography

Mischa Twitchin is a Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. Besides numerous chapters and articles, his publications include: *The Theatre of Death: The Uncanny in Mimesis: Tadeusz Kantor, Aby Warburg, and an Iconology of the Actor* (Palgrave 2016); and an edited volume, *Wittgenstein and Performance* (Rowman and Littlefield 2023). His essay- and performance-films are freely accessible on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/user13124826/videos.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DECOLONISING THE STAGE: RITUALISED KNOWLEDGE IN THE THEATRE INITIATION PROCESS

SHALOM ÌBÍRÓNKẸ́ BOWEN UNIVERSITY, NIGERIA
YEMI ATANDA OSUN STATE UNIVERSITY, NIGERIA

Abstract

Initiation ceremonies in university Theatre Arts departments across Nigeria and other parts of Africa have been met with many widely held assumptions, including that the ceremonies are heathenistic, unnecessary, and even unprofessional due to their occurrence at the start of theatre training rather than at its conclusion, as is common in other professions. Through an integration of specific African philosophical frameworks, we discover and reveal the profound cultural and pedagogical significance of these rituals and their implications for decolonial practices in theatre. Central to this exploration is the concept of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness with its maxim "I am because we are." Ubuntu positions initiation rituals as a means of integrating new members into a communal fold, as is also obtainable in the African rites of passage that mark significant transitions across life phases. This has transformative goals similar to those of theatre initiation practices. I draw on the mytho-ritual framework, rooted in African mythology and prevalent in the works of African playwrights like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, for its resonance with these initiation practices. I propose that theatre initiation ceremonies offer unique insights that challenge and enrich global performance discourses by situating these Indigenous philosophies within the broader context of performance philosophy. The research thus provides a critical lens for reimagining theatre education as a site of decolonial praxis and cultural affirmation.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):119–136
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101538
ISSN 2057-7176

Introduction

In 2021, first-year Theatre Arts students at Rivers State University were seen having a parade around the campus adorned in body paint on their exposed shoulders, draped in red and black cotton wrappers. The spectacle sparked mixed reactions. While some appreciated the vibrancy and cultural resonance of the display, many others criticised it as heathenistic, unnecessary, or unprofessional, highlighting a broader contention surrounding initiation ceremonies in theatre education, which are often misunderstood or dismissed outright.

Initiation ceremonies are structured processes held in Theatre Arts departments across universities in Nigeria and other parts of Africa every first semester when new students arrive. These new students undergo the initiation process, which culminates in the initiation ceremony that formally welcomes them into the theatre community. Unlike rituals in other professions, such as the White Coat Ceremony in medical education or induction ceremonies in physiotherapy, typically marking the culmination of training, theatre initiation rituals occur at the very beginning of a student's journey, prompting scepticism about their purpose and relevance.

The scepticism surrounding theatre initiation rituals stems largely from a lack of understanding of their cultural and philosophical foundations, especially within African contexts. There are hardly any academic articles in Nigerian and African scholarship detailing the rationale behind the theatre initiation ceremony. This gap in knowledge leaves room for misinterpretation, often fueled by conspiracy theories or outright falsehoods. Even within the theatre profession, practitioners sometimes engage in these rituals without a clear understanding of their deeper meanings, performing them out of tradition rather than intent. This disconnect reveals an urgent need to detail the rationale behind theatre initiation ceremonies and situate them within a broader philosophical and cultural framework.

This article seeks to reframe the perception of theatre initiation ceremonies by grounding their purpose and relevance in relation to African philosophical traditions. It challenges dominant Eurocentric discourses that marginalise non-Western pedagogic practices, examining how Indigenous philosophies intersect with contemporary performance theory. Drawing from extensive experience of managing, directing, and participating in theatre initiation ceremonies, as well as from foundational works in African theatre philosophy, this paper highlights how these rituals serve as vital models for decolonial praxis in theatre education. I argue that far from being superstitious or perfunctory, theatre initiation ceremonies are performative rites of passage, deeply rooted in African cultural and philosophical traditions. Situating theatre initiation ceremonies within a decolonial framework allows this research to contribute to ongoing conversations on reimagining theatre pedagogy and philosophy, both within African contexts and globally.

Conceptual Frameworks

Ubuntu Philosophy: A Lens for Understanding Communal Identity

> Your pain is My pain,
> My wealth is Your wealth,
> Your salvation is My salvation. (Mbiti 1969, 108)

At its core, Ubuntu asserts that people are inherently bound to one another. It emphasises mutual responsibility, compassion, dignity, and harmony. It is a social philosophy integral to African culture, aimed at building and maintaining a sense of community. Ubuntu challenges the Western notion of individualism by rooting the identity of the individual in their community. This is encapsulated in the maxim, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 108–109). This principle is echoed in African proverbs like "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (Nguni) and "motho ke motho ka batho babang" (Sotho), both of which translate to "A person is a person through other people" (Mkhize 1998, 1).

Consequently, in Ubuntu, human beings are strongly interdependent, so they are not fully formed in isolation but thrive within a "tender network of interdependence" (Battle 1997, in Nussbaum 2003, 22). Turaki (2006, 36) elaborates that people are not autonomous entities but members of a community, deeply intertwined through relationships. While Ubuntu thrives in African communities, scholars like Nussbaum argue that it offers significant potential for global application, particularly in a world often divided and fragmented. Nussbaum (2003, 22) envisions Ubuntu as a cornerstone of the African Renaissance, capable of enabling global interconnectedness and unity.

A fundamental tenet of Ubuntu is respect for each person's dignity and humanity. Actions that enhance the dignity and humanity of others are deemed right, while those that degrade or harm are considered wrong (Broodryk 2005, 174). The term Ubuntu translates loosely to "humanness" or "being human" (Khoza 2006, 6). Desmond Tutu offers an explanation of Ubuntu which contrasts African communal values with Western individualism:

> Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu"; "Hey, he or she has ubuntu." This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. (Tutu 1999, 34–35)

Ubuntu promotes ethical actions that enhance the well-being of others. It posits that ethical actions are those that contribute positively to the welfare of one's community and fellows. The philosophy asserts that actions should promote the well-being of others without violating their rights. This principle highlights the balance between individual rights and communal welfare. It consequently encourages solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened, advocating for actions that support vulnerable communities. The philosophy underscores that individual success is tied to the

success of the community, consequently promoting a sense of collective responsibility and mutual support (Lutz 2009, 315).

As an analytical framework for this study, Ubuntu provides a lens through which we can interpret the theatre initiation process as more than mere tradition—it is a manifestation of communal identity formation that challenges the individualistic paradigms prevalent in Western educational models. The initiation processes embody Ubuntu principles by emphasising collective growth, shared responsibility, and the interconnectedness of all participants. Through this lens, we can understand how these rituals serve as decolonial interventions that reclaim Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Rites of Passage: Transformative Journeys in African Contexts

Initiation rites are a deep part of African cosmology. They serve as important ceremonies with implications for both the individual participant and the community. These rites are integral to celebrating significant life transitions, such as the passage from childhood to adulthood. These rites help people navigate changes in status and identity, offering guidance to them in their new roles within their community (Kyalo 2013, 37). These rites of passage often involve key moments in life, including marriage, parenthood, and even death (Burrow 2023, 22).

In African societies, these initiation rites hold huge cultural and spiritual significance. They are transformative processes that not only prepare people for new roles but also embed them within a shared cultural and spiritual framework. For the initiates, these rituals provide a structured means to recognise, acknowledge, and adapt to their evolving identities. At the same time, the ceremonies serve as communal affirmations of their acceptance of these new social roles and responsibilities. Initiation rites therefore help the individual initiate reflect on the transformative experiences, and it also offers a framework to make sense of their transitions and reinforces their sense of belonging within the community.

The dramatic elements of initiation ceremonies, such as dances, symbolic actions, and the use of sacred objects, imbue these rites with deep meaning. These elements serve to emphasise the significance of the transition, instilling a deep sense of cultural identity and purpose in the participants. Furthermore, initiation rites enable psychological growth and social integration by affirming the individual's new identity and responsibilities. They help initiates navigate the complexities of their evolving roles and the expectations placed upon them in society.

One of the most vital functions of initiation rites is the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and sacred knowledge to the younger generation. These ceremonies are not merely symbolic; they are educational processes through which initiates learn about their community's history, traditions, and spiritual foundations. This cultural education is essential for preserving and perpetuating the community's heritage (Kyalo 2013, 40). Moreover, initiation rites strengthen communal bonds by bringing together families in celebration and the wider community. These collective events create a sense of unity, support, and shared identity, reinforcing the interconnectedness between the individual and the community. As Mbiti (1969) observed, the well-being of the individual is

inseparable from that of the community, and rituals are a means of expressing and sustaining this interdependence.

While rites of passage have historically served as key rituals for guiding people through life's transitions, it has been asserted in scholarly spaces that these ceremonies must remain relevant and dynamic. Artz et al. (1998, 367) argue that rites of passage should not be static or empty formulas but rather meaningful practices that evolve to reflect contemporary societal values and realities. Without such adaptability, young people may create their own informal, and sometimes detrimental, rituals to navigate their identities and transitions (Artz et al. 1998, 360). This challenge is particularly evident in contemporary societies like the United States, where there is a noted scarcity of structured youth-focused rites of passage. The *Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential* (2022) highlights that this absence can lead to confusion, disillusionment, and a lack of well-being among young adults as they struggle to establish their identity and place in society. To address this, scholars suggest that institutions such as universities promote structured rites of passage that encourage healthy lifestyles, for adults to offer mentorship, and for religious communities to provide moral and ethical guidance (Smith et al. 2011, 54). This indicates a need for more structured and supportive rites of passage. Whether in traditional or modern contexts, the value of these rites lies in their ability to guide people through critical life transitions, affirm their roles within the community, and ensure the continuity of cultural and social values.

Mytho-Ritual Framework: An Analytical Tool for Theatre Practices

The term "Mytho-Ritual" refers to the interconnectedness of myth and ritual within cultural, religious, or social frameworks, particularly in African contexts. This framework serves as our primary analytical tool for understanding the significance and function of theatre initiation ceremonies. Thus, below is an exploration of its key components and their relevance to our analysis:

Definition and Interconnectedness

Myths are traditional stories that convey a society's beliefs, customs, and ideals. They often explain the origins of the world, natural phenomena, or human practices through characters like gods, heroes, or supernatural beings. Rituals, on the other hand, are ceremonial acts or sequences performed in a set manner, often as part of a religious or cultural tradition. They can include rites, ceremonies, festivals, or daily practices laden with symbolic meaning.

The mytho-ritual symbiosis is characterised by mutual reinforcement where myths supply the narrative and ideological backbone that justifies or explains the rituals, while rituals bring myths to life, making them tangible and experiential. Together, they serve to maintain cultural continuity and identity, educating and reinforcing values, history, and social norms through storytelling and participatory acts. They perform symbolic roles, like defining relationships with the divine, nature, or community, and practical ones, such as marking significant life transitions, seasons, or social statuses. Psychologically, these practices offer comfort, resolve existential queries, and strengthen communal bonds.

Elements of the Framework

In Indigenous cultures, mytho-rituals might manifest in creation stories paired with dances or ceremonies that celebrate these origins. In religious traditions like Christianity, the myth of Christ's resurrection is embodied in the ritual of Easter celebrations. Scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner have analysed how myths and rituals function to maintain societal order or inspire change.

African initiation rites exemplify this mytho-ritual connection. They are sacred and they involve spiritual elements like offerings and prayers that link participants to ancestors and the divine. These rites are not just ceremonial; they invoke blessings, guidance, and protection, reinforcing the spiritual framework of the community. They are rooted in mythology, where stories of ancestors, deities, and supernatural beings provide context for the rituals, connecting participants to their cultural heritage and foundational myths. They also educate the young about the community's sacred knowledge, rooted in myth, teaching moral and ethical codes alongside the spiritual significance of rituals, thus preserving cultural integrity.

Transformation and Symbolism. Initiation often involves symbolic acts that signify transformation, using masks, masquerades, body paintings, sacred objects, and gestures to represent life's transitions, drawing directly from mythological themes. Participants may undergo physical and psychological challenges that symbolise their shedding of childhood and their emergence into adulthood (Kyalo 2013, 39). This transformation is akin to the mythical journeys of heroes who face trials and emerge changed, embodying the values and strengths of their culture.

Application in African Theatre

In African theatre, scholars like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan leverage this mytho-ritual framework to explore cultural identity and address contemporary issues. Osofisan adapts oral tradition, myths, legends, and folktales to address social and political issues, symbolically representing society's contradictions and envisioning possibilities for positive change. He argues that history and myth should be reinterpreted to empower the marginalised, not just to record the achievements of the ruling elite (quoted in Ogungbade 1983, 33). He believes history is relevant only as it clarifies the present, advocating for narratives that highlight the struggles of the masses.

In *Morountodun* (1982), Osofisan reinterprets the myth of Queen Moremi via Titubi, a character who takes on Queen Moremi's role during a peasant revolt but ultimately aligns with the peasants against her own class. This novel interpretation merges two historical periods and uses Moremi's legend to illustrate contemporary issues. Titubi's transformation is symbolised as "Morountodun" or "sweet thing," representing a new consciousness that converts the rich to fight for the poor. Osofisan reinterprets Moremi's myth from a socialist realist perspective, suggesting that different historical and social conditions would yield different narratives. He creatively reimagines Moremi as a revolutionary figure opposing the gods and traditional values. This parallels characters like Latoye in *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and Biokun in *No More The Wasted Breed* (1983). Through characters like Moremi, Titubi, and Marshall, Osofisan urges society to defy oppression, reshape traditional values, and take control of its destiny. He posits that the reinterpretation of

myths and history can inspire social change, envisioning a future where the common people, like Latoye in *The Chattering and the Song*, remould their reality.

Osofisan challenges established norms and histories from the perspective of the oppressed. He suggests that people can shape their own destiny by reimagining their cultural and historical narratives. This is similar to the revolutionary vision advanced in *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) where Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii prescribe through their sympathetic portrayal of the farmers that the writer must be committed on the side of the majority. It is also adopted by other African writers like *The Curse* by Kole Omotoso (1976), *If...* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) by Ola Rotimi, *Katakata For Sufferhead* ([1978] 1983) by Segun Oyekunle, and *Kinjekitile* (1970) by Ibrahim Hussein. These plays shift focus from the privileged to the common people.

This, however, contrasts with the likes of Soyinka and JP Clark's more traditional views, where myth is often treated with reverence and seen as a reflection of absolute truths (Onwueme 1991, 51). Soyinka uses Yoruba mythology to explore metaphysical interconnectedness of history, ritual, and drama. In his book, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976), Soyinka uses Yoruba deities like Ogun (the god of iron and war) and Sango (the god of thunder) to illustrate the cosmic birth of tragedy in African experience. His plays often draw parallels between African and Greek mythologies, highlighting the universal relevance of African myths.

Both Soyinka and Osofisan however incorporate elements of African oral traditions and storytelling into their works. This includes the use of proverbs, songs, and communal experiences that resonate with audiences, making the themes more relatable and impactful. Osofisan's plays, for example, often feature dialogues that challenge authority and encourage collective action, reflecting the communal nature of African societies as further emphasised by the Ubuntu philosophy. The philosophical approach to myth in their works also varies. Soyinka often engages with the existential and tragic dimensions of human experience through myth, while Osofisan focuses on the potential for change and empowerment. He advocates for a more dynamic and reconstructive view of human conditions.

Analytical Application to Theatre Initiation

Using the mytho-ritual framework as our analytical tool allows us to examine theatre initiation ceremonies as:

- Sites of knowledge transmission where cultural values and theatrical traditions are passed to new generations
- Transformative experiences that mark the transition from outsider to member of the theatre community
- Symbolic performances that enact broader cultural narratives about identity, community, and belonging
- Decolonial practices that reclaim Indigenous ways of knowing and challenge Western theatrical paradigms

This framework provides a structured approach to understanding how these ceremonies function beyond their surface elements, revealing their deeper cultural and philosophical significance.

The Ritual Process: Costumes, Rehearsals, and Community Building

Initiation ceremonies are held in Theatre Arts departments across Universities in Nigeria and some other countries in Africa, every first semester when new students arrive. These new students are made to undergo the initiation process which ultimately builds to the initiation ceremony. During initiation, older students under the guidance of staff members teach the new students the basics of the art of theatre.

Costumes and Appearance

They are first told to get Black rehearsal wears. And during this process, especially when they have to do dance movements involving crawling, they realise why the rehearsal wears have to be black and not more fanciful colours like white or pink, as white absorbs dirt. They are also told that this black rehearsal wear must be uniform—everyone must have it and wear it to rehearsal. During the rehearsal process, they realise that Black is the choice colour because it is a neutral colour that doesn't distract the eye. This allows performers to focus on their movements and interactions rather than on each other's clothing. It also helps directors and choreographers to envision the overall scene without visual distractions. Wearing black also creates a sense of uniformity among the cast and crew, consequently creating a collaborative atmosphere. This subtly says to everyone that they are part of the same team working toward the same goal. Black clothing can also blend into the background of the theatre easily if needed. This makes it useful for stagehands and crew members who need to be less noticeable during scene changes or even technical rehearsals. As a colour, Black conveys a sense of professionalism and discipline. It signals that participants are serious about their craft and are ready to work.

Figure 1. Bowen University's 2024 Theatre Induction

Discipline and Time Management

Participants are also told that Call Time is important and that a rehearsal scheduled for 7:00 am should hold no later than 7:00 am. Those who come later than the call time are punished. Sometime during the initiation process, they see how when performers playing major roles come late, the rehearsal is held to ransom and no one gets to do anything productive until they are around. They then learn that Call time ensures that all members of the cast and crew arrive on time. They realise that this is essential for maintaining discipline and professionalism within the team as punctuality is a sign of professionalism and discipline, which are crucial traits in the performing arts. Being on time shows respect for the craft, the trainers, and fellow performers. This respect is drilled into the initiates during initiation. The rehearsal cannot run smoothly without everyone being present because theatre and performance art are collaborative endeavours. Late arrivals disrupt rehearsals. They affect the team morale and impede the smooth operation of the rehearsal process. Not adhering to call times ensures that rehearsals and training sessions do not run efficiently and on schedule. In cases where the rehearsal space is rented for a specific time, late arrivals can cause delays and potentially result in incomplete rehearsals or insufficient preparation time. Conversely, being on time allows performers to adequately prepare, both physically and mentally. Latecomers might miss warm-ups, important instructions, or crucial parts of the rehearsal, compromising their performance and the overall quality of the production. When everyone comes in time, there is an air of fairness and equality. The environment feels supportive and respectful. They therefore see why penalties for lateness help reinforce this standard and ensure consistency throughout the process.

Community Building Through Shared Experience

As they all wear all-Black and they are the only ones who wear that colour on campus, it is easy for them to recognise each other. Sometimes, they get to come down to campus together. Initiation rehearsal could start at 7:00 am, end by 9:00 am just in time for students to have regular classes, then resume at 4:00pm or at 10:00 pm and run through the night. Theatre initiates spend an extensive period of time with each other when one adds rehearsal time with regular lecture time. This means that on some days, they spend as many as 15 hours with each other. The result of this is that they begin to form stronger bonds, camaraderie and trust among the group. They will soon realise that these strong interpersonal bonds enhance teamwork and collaboration, both on and off the stage, which they will need throughout their careers. Unlike in other educational programmes in the University, theatre art courses often require theory and practicals and most of these practicals are done in teams. Improved teamwork skills therefore prepare them for the post-initiation reality.

Continuous interaction improves their communication skills. These young artists learn to express their ideas more effectively and understand each other's cues and nuances, which is crucial for seamless performances and collaborations. Regular classes and rehearsals also provide opportunities for shared learning experiences. Artists can exchange feedback, learn from each other's strengths, and collectively improve their skills. They begin to build memories and form in-group languages and codes often from plays. Students then get their first nicknames, usually after their first role. A student named 'Adebayo' then gets the nickname 'Mandela' because he plays the

role of Mandela in an adaptation of *Long Walk to Freedom*. This close-knit environment can lead to creative synergy. Collaborators often develop a deeper understanding of each other's creative processes, increasing the possibility of them being inspired to create more cohesive and innovative performances. When they spend these extensive periods of time together, they get to create a support system where artists can rely on one another for emotional and motivational support. The rigorous schedule of rehearsals and classes also instil in them discipline and time management skills. These young artists learn to balance various demands, which is valuable for their professional growth. And when they begin to rehearse, they are informed that they can mount challenges for each other's roles. This creates an environment of healthy competition, where people strive for excellence while also celebrating each other's achievements. You will see them clapping when a person challenges for a role and the original 'owner' of the role does it even better on second attempt.

Adaptation and Resilience

Many times, this extensive period of time includes rehearsing at 'odd' hours. This is often because of scarcity. There are many performances and only a few spaces. These performance spaces may only be available at unconventional times, especially at busy periods or with shared venues. Additionally, not cast and crew members have varied schedules. This sometimes necessitates late-night or early-morning rehearsals. Lighting, sound checks, and other technical rehearsals are often scheduled for times when the venue is otherwise free. This can be outside standard hours. Creatives soon realise that inspiration and creativity don't always adhere to a 9-to-5 schedule. Rehearsing at different times can help artists tap into different energies and perspectives.

These unconventional rehearsal times therefore prepare artists to adapt to the unpredictable nature of theatre production schedules. It mirrors the realities of professional theatre, where rehearsals and performances can simply happen at any time. It also reinforces the importance of commitment and discipline, qualities essential for a successful career in the performing arts. These rehearsals at unconventional times can sometimes lead to heightened focus and creativity, as there may be fewer distractions.

The Ceremonial Aspects: Songs, Processions, and Community Integration

The theatre experience that this births inspired the lyrics of the Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Students Association. It says:

> No one can say,
> No one can tell,
> The kind of love that binds us
> The theatre arts people,
> Are great people
> And the love that binds us stands,
> The code of love,
> That binds us,
> Spirit, soul, and body, we have become one, and so shall it be forever.

This anthem is first sung after the initiation rites are done during the initiation ceremony, after they have been declared theatre artists. When they sing this during initiation, they sing it with purpose and meaning because they have formed a bond, a tight-knit with these people with which they embarked on the initiation journey. A popular initiation song goes:

(Yoruba)	(English)
O wuwo me le gbe o	It's so heavy, I can't carry it
O wuwo lati gbe	It's so heavy to be carried
Eni o ri re o pe ko pada o	Whoever is not right in the mind should withdraw
Ah, o wuwo lati gbe	Ah, it's so heavy to be carried
Eni ara re o ya ko pada o	Whoever feels ill should withdraw
Ah, o wuwo lati gbe	Ah, it's so heavy to be carried
Omo olosu meje ko dehin o	The seven-months old child should withdraw
Ah, o wuwo lati gbe	Ah, it's so heavy to be carried

A key part of the initiation is an initiation procession. The procession is done around the university. It is rooted in tradition, symbolism, and community. Just like traditional African initiation rites, the procession symbolises a rite of passage for the new students. It marks their transition from novices to members of the theatre arts community, and signifies their readiness to embrace the responsibilities and privileges that come with this new role. They sing:

There is one course I want to read o
There is one course I want to read
Eh, I want to read theatre
Eh, I want to read theatre
Eh, Eh, Eh, I want to read theatre
There is one course I want to read.

They sing these songs, often flowing between solemnly and a faster pace. The procession helps integrate the new students into the wider university community. As they move through different parts of the campus, they symbolically connect with various facets of the university life, reinforcing their sense of belonging. The act of processing around the university grounds also reflects the preservation of tradition. Older students lead the procession as they go around and they should tell the initiates the story behind the places being toured and of the theatre arts, especially as practiced on that campus. This way, they honour the history and cultural practices of theatre arts and connect the new generation of students with those who came before them. Importantly, the procession and the songs serve to publicly recognise the new students and their commitment to theatre arts. They declare: I *want* to study theatre. It allows the entire university to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements and growth of these individuals. Walking together as a group also creates a sense of unity and camaraderie among the new students. It builds team spirit and reinforces the bonds formed during their initial training period. Ultimately, the procession adds a ceremonial gravitas to the initiation, making the event memorable and significant. This is why the makeup and costume of the procession is usually other-worldly, picturesque, and comment-provoking. This emphasises the seriousness and respect associated with joining the theatre arts community. By the end of the initiation, the initiates know each other so closely. They understand

that theatre is a collaborative art which can never be achieved in isolation. They learn to be intentional about collaboration. Their identity becomes rooted in their community and the ubuntu ideal is fulfilled.

Ubuntu and Theatre Initiation: Embodying Communal Interconnectedness

Ubuntu's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all people and the idea that "I am because we are" aligns closely with the principles and practices observed in initiation ceremonies, especially as the initiation process creates a sense of belonging and unity within the theatre community. This reflects the Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on community and the idea that individuals find their identity through their relationships with others—"I am because we are."

When new members are educated about the history, traditions, ethics, and values of their theatre community, trainers are ensuring the continuity and preservation of the cultural heritage they love dearly. This aligns with Ubuntu's focus on collective memory and shared learning. Teaching the ethics and values that underpin theatre practice helps instil a sense of responsibility and moral integrity in new members. This moral education is a core aspect of Ubuntu, which values the development of people who contribute positively to their community.

The initiation rituals emphasise the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future. By connecting new members with the traditions and histories of their community, trainers help reinforce the idea that each person's actions and contributions are part of a larger, ongoing cultural narrative. The process of initiation helps new members understand their role within the theatre community and recognise their contributions to the collective identity. This mirrors the Ubuntu belief that an individual's well-being and success are tied to the well-being and success of the group.

As an analytical lens, Ubuntu allows us to understand these initiation ceremonies not merely as performative acts but as profound expressions of communal identity and responsibility. The extensive time spent together, the shared challenges, and the collective celebration all embody the Ubuntu principle that one's humanity is bound up in others'. The emphasis on punctuality, respect for the craft, and commitment to the group illustrates how these ceremonies cultivate ethical responsibilities toward the collective—a core element of Ubuntu philosophy.

Through this Ubuntu lens, we can see how the theatre initiation process functions as a decolonial practice by promoting values that challenge Western individualism and competitive education models. The ceremonies create a sense of collective growth and mutual support that counters colonial paradigms of individual achievement and merit. They create spaces where Indigenous knowledge systems can thrive and where students can develop identities rooted in their cultural contexts rather than imposed Western models by centring communal values and responsibilities.

Implications for Decolonial Practices: Reclaiming Cultural Knowledge and Identity

Understanding initiation rituals through traditional African mytho-rituals disrupts colonial narratives on educational rituals, and centres a decolonial perspective on pedagogy. The incorporation of these traditional African rituals and practices positions theatre education as one that veers away from its Eurocentric nature and reclaims and re-centres Indigenous cultural heritage. This challenges colonial narratives that often marginalised or dismissed non-Western cultural forms.

It is important to note that very shortly before theatre and drama started in Nigerian Universities, renowned European anthropologist, Ruth Finnegan dismissed traditional African drama, saying: "with a few possible exceptions, there is no tradition in Africa of artistic performances which includes all the elements which might be demanded in a strict definition of drama—or at least not with the emphases to which we are accustomed" (Finnegan [1970] 2012, 516). These rituals therefore affirm the identities of students, emphasising the value of their own cultural heritage. Consequently, this counters the colonial mindset that often-imposed Western norms and devalued local traditions. When these rituals are portrayed and centred, they highlight and validate Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of learning. They emphasise the importance of oral traditions, communal practices, and spirituality, providing a more holistic and Africanised approach to education. They serve as acts of resistance against the homogenisation and standardisation imposed by colonial education systems. They underscore the diversity and richness of African cultures.

When students engage in these rituals, they are given a sense of ownership over their cultural practices. These young adults who are raised in post-colonial African societies which are so heavily colonised that students are told that African Traditional languages are vernacular, and that African Traditional religious forms are heathenistic. This process then empowers them and gives them a renegotiated relationship with their culture and tradition. A sense of agency and pride in their heritage is therefore created in them and they are encouraged if not inspired to challenge and critique colonial legacies. Among them, they successfully build strong communal bonds among students, as is expected of Africans, and in this case, students of African origin. This promotes a sense of solidarity and collective identity. This communal approach contrasts with the individualistic focus often found in colonial education systems.

With colonial education, the vision was to create, as Macaulay ([1835] 1995) infamously suggested a colonised populace who were "European in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This is echoed by Thomas Jefferson Bowen (1857, 312) who stated that "Our design and hopes in regard to Africa are not simply to bring as many individuals as possible to the knowledge of Christ. We desire to establish the gospel in the hearts and mind and social life of the people.... This cannot be done without civilization." Civilisation involved replacing Indigenous forms of entertainment which they considered "paganistic" with more "civilised" forms (Adedeji 1971, 25). This new civilisation involved the creation of a sense of individual achievement and personal ambition over collective community values. The initiation rituals integrate various art forms, including dance, music,

storytelling, and visual arts, offering a multi-disciplinary approach to learning. This enriches the educational experience and broadens the scope of what is considered valuable knowledge. The reinterpretation of myths and history from a local perspective enables these rituals to challenge the dominant narratives imposed by colonialism. They offer alternative histories and perspectives that are more inclusive and representative of local cultures.

African Initiation Ceremonies and Performance Philosophy

The initiation ceremonies in Theatre Arts departments across African universities, particularly in Nigeria, have significant intersections with global discourses on performance philosophy. They can therefore be used to engage global discourses on performance and its philosophical underpinnings. Rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, these rituals extend beyond the practicalities of theatre training, embedding participants within a performative framework that merges Indigenous knowledge systems, communal ethos, and the collaborative spirit of theatre. They also offer alternative models for understanding performance as a collective, transformative, and deeply ethical process. For these initiation process to contribute to a broader understanding of performance as a means of cultural continuity and innovation, there is a need to reframe them as performative acts of knowledge transmission, identity formation, and community building as we attempt to do in this work.

Initiation rituals are deeply rooted in African Indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasise collective learning, moral education, and the transmission of values through embodied practices. The requirement for black rehearsal wears, for instance, is not merely a practical guideline but a symbolic tool. This symbol reinforces discipline, uniformity, and the collaborative essence of theatre while subtly teaching participants the importance of neutrality (to the eye) and professionalism in performance. These elements of the initiation process align with performance philosophy's interest in the ways material and embodied practices shape cognition and cultural understanding. Engaging in these embodied traditions allows new students an introduction to an Indigenous pedagogical model that prioritises learning by doing. This model contrasts with Western-centric paradigms of individualistic instruction, offering an alternative that values communal interdependence and experiential knowledge. In this way, initiation ceremonies provide a performative means of bridging the theoretical and the practical, aligning with the philosophical inquiry into how performance can function as a mode of knowing and being.

A central philosophy underpinning these initiation rituals is Ubuntu, the African ideal of interconnectedness captured in the phrase "I am because we are." The education of new members about the ethics and values of theatre allows theatre initiation rituals to ensure the continuity of a cultural heritage that values integrity, discipline, and collective growth. The initiation process, with its emphasis on teamwork, camaraderie, and shared purpose, embodies Ubuntu principles. Participants spend extensive hours together, navigating challenges and supporting one another, creating a deep sense of community and mutual reliance. This mirrors the Ubuntu ethic of identity being rooted in relationships, a principle that resonates profoundly within performance philosophy's examination of relational and collective existence. For example, the initiation procession symbolises a rite of passage and communal integration. As participants tour the university grounds, singing

songs that affirm their commitment to theatre arts, they engage in a performative declaration of belonging. This act ties them to the traditions of their predecessors while asserting their place within the larger university community. Such rituals exemplify performance philosophy's exploration of how performative acts create and sustain community identities, reinforcing the idea that performance is not merely representational but constitutive of social reality. Even the bonds formed during extended hours of training and rehearsals, often under challenging conditions, cultivate trust and camaraderie, which are vital for collaborative art forms. This practice aligns with performance philosophy's focus on the interplay between individual expression and collective creation, consequently offering a model where identity and artistry are constructed through interdependence and shared experiences. The emphasis on interconnectedness and moral education situates these initiation ceremonies within the broader philosophical discourse on the role of performance in shaping ethical subjectivities. The ceremonies contribute to a vision of performance that transcends aesthetics, positioning it as a practice of ethical and communal significance by cultivating a sense of responsibility and mutual respect among its participants.

The communal ethos inherent in these ceremonies challenges Western notions of individualism in performance. They also challenge dominant Western notions of professionalism and artistic practice. Practices such as rehearsing at unconventional hours and allowing students to challenge roles emphasise adaptability, resourcefulness, and healthy competition. These practices prepare participants for the unpredictable and collaborative nature of theatre production, enacting a model of artistry that is rigorous yet deeply communal. Such an approach stands in contrast to the often hierarchical and individualistic frameworks of Western theatre traditions. When these processes foreground collective engagement and shared responsibility, they propose an alternative performative ethic that prioritises community over individual achievement. These reframing positions initiation ceremonies as critical interventions in global performance philosophy, offering models of practice grounded in Indigenous contexts.

The initiation processions, featuring other-worldly costumes and evocative songs, transform the act of walking into a performative ritual that connects new students with the history and traditions of their discipline. The symbolic journey across the university campus not only integrates initiates into the university community but also establishes a continuum between past and present practitioners. This aligns with performance philosophy's exploration of temporality and the performative act as a means of connecting different temporal and spatial dimensions. Through these processions, the initiates embody the philosophical concept of "becoming"—a transformation from novice to practitioner that is both physical and metaphysical. The ceremonial gravitas of the processions highlights the seriousness and respect accorded to the theatrical tradition, positioning performance as a sacred act deeply rooted in cultural and historical context.

Through their unique synthesis of ritual, pedagogy, and philosophy, initiation ceremonies in Nigerian Theatre Arts departments contribute significantly to global discourses on performance. They demonstrate how Indigenous practices can enrich performance theory by highlighting the ethical, relational, and cultural dimensions of performative acts. The integration of songs, processions, and communal rituals demonstrates how traditional practices can inform contemporary performance

philosophy. These ceremonies invite a rethinking of performance as a site of cultural memory, ethical engagement, communal transformation, knowledge production, and social transformation. These rituals invite scholars and practitioners to rethink the role of performance in shaping communal identities and preserving cultural heritages. They underscore the potential of performance philosophy to embrace diverse epistemologies, emphasising the importance of contextual, embodied, and relational practices in the ongoing exploration of what it means to perform and to be. By situating these ceremonies within the broader framework of performance philosophy, this study highlights their capacity to inspire new ways of thinking about performance as a deeply interconnected and transformative practice. Through an emphasis on the interconnectedness of the individual and the community, these rituals challenge the global discourse to move beyond individualist frameworks and embrace models of performance rooted in shared humanity and collective identity. As such, they offer a rich alternative to understanding the transformative power of performance in a way that bridges the local and the global, the traditional and the contemporary.

Conclusion

We have illuminated the significance of initiation rituals in Theatre Arts departments. We have also highlighted their value as both cultural and pedagogical practices. These ceremonies serve as rites of passage that integrate students into a shared theatrical tradition while instilling critical values such as discipline, collaboration, and ethical responsibility. Rooted in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, these rituals emphasise the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, offering an alternative model of performance as a collective and transformative endeavour. The integration of processions, songs, and rehearsals as performative acts underscores their role in shaping practitioners who are not only skilled artists but also ethical and socially conscious individuals. The findings reaffirm that these initiation rituals are more than cultural artefacts; rather, they are dynamic pedagogical tools that enable a holistic understanding of theatre. They prepare students for the demands of professional practice while grounding them in a cultural heritage that values collective growth and ethical engagement. This approach challenges dominant Western paradigms of performance, offering a decolonial praxis that situates performance within broader ethical and communal frameworks. The broader implications of this study extend beyond Africa. For theatre education globally, these rituals provide a model for integrating cultural traditions into pedagogical practices, emphasising the importance of collective identity and ethical responsibility. Non-African contexts could benefit from adopting similar practices that foreground collaboration, adaptability, and the communal aspects of performance. Moreover, the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into global performance studies enriches the discourse, challenging the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks and enabling a more inclusive understanding of performance. Future research could explore comparative studies across different cultural contexts, examining how initiation rituals and similar practices manifest in diverse theatrical traditions. Such studies could reveal universal principles of performance education while highlighting unique cultural variations. Additionally, further research into the long-term impacts of these rituals on students' professional and ethical development could provide deeper insights into their pedagogical efficacy.

Works Cited

Adedeji, Joel. 1971. "The Church and the Emergence of the Nigerian Theatre, 1866–1914." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6 (1): 25–45.

Artz, Sibylle, Daniel G. Scott, and James P. Anglin. 1998. "Rites of Passage: A Conversation on Becoming Adult." *Child and Youth Care Forum* 27 (5): 355–77. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02589261.

Bowen, Thomas, J. 1857. *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the Interior of Africa: 1849–1856*. Charleston Publishers.

Broodryk, Johann. 2002. *Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa*. Ubuntu School of Philosophy.

Burrow, Heather Marie. 2023. "Ritualized into Adulthood: The Scarcity of Youth-Focused Rites of Passage in America." *Discover Global Society* 1 (1): 22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-023-00027-3.

Finnegan, Ruth. (1970) 2012. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Open Book Publishers.

Hussein, Ibrahim. 1970. *Kinjekitile*. Oxford University Press

Khoza, Reuel J. 2006. *Let Africa Lead: African Transformational Leadership for 21st Century Business*. Vezubuntu.

Kyalo, Paul. 2013. "Initiation Rites and Rituals in African Cosmology." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1): 34–46.

Lutz, David W. 2009. "African Ubuntu Philosophy and Global Management." *Journal of Business Ethics* 84 (3): 313–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0204-z.

Macaulay, Thomas B. (1835) 1995. "Minute on Indian Education." In Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, 428–430. Routledge.

Mbiti, John. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann.

Mkhize, Nhlanhla. 1998. "Culture, Morality and Self, In Search of an Africentric Voice," unpublished manuscript, University of Natal—Pietermaritzberg, Department of Psychology, South Africa Initiative.

Nussbaum, Barbara. 2003 "Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity." *Reflections* 4 (4):: 21–26.

Ogungbade, Jide. 1983. "Vision and the Artist: The Dramaturgy of Femi Osofisan." M.A. Thesis, University of Ibadan.

Omotoso, Kole. 1976. *The Curse: A One Act Play in Four Scenes*. New Horn.

Onwueme, Tess Akaeke. 1991."Visions of Myth in Nigerian Drama: Femi Osofisan versus Wole Soyinka." *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 25 (1): 58–69.

Osofisan, Femi. 1977. *The Chattering and the Song*. Ibadan University Press.

Osofisan, Femi. 1982. *Morountodun and Other Plays*. Longman.

Osofisan, Femi. 1982. *No More the Wasted Breed*. Longman.

Oyekunle, Segun. (1978) 1983. *Katakata For Sufferhead*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rotimi, Ola. 1983. *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled*. Heinemann.

Rotimi, Ola. 1988. *Hopes of the Living Dead*. Spectrum Books.

Smith, Christian, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog. 2011. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford University Press.

Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge University Press.

The Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential (EWPHP). 2022. "Absence of rites of passage." http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/137812. Accessed 20 July 2024.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa, and Ngugi wa Mirii. 1982. *I Will Marry When I Want*. Heinemann.

Turaki, Yusufu. 2006. *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*. WordAlive Publishers.

Tutu, Desmond. 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Doubleday.

Biographies

Shalom Ìbírónkẹ́ teaches at the Theatre Arts Programme in Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria. He has a background in theatre and activism. His research focuses on managing the inclusion and amplification of marginalised voices in the Nigerian creative industry.

Yemi Atanda is a playwright, director, and poet. He holds a teaching position at the Department of Theatre Arts, Osun State University. He has a keen interest in play production, and as a director, is evolving a style that he calls mathematical symbolism.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DIGITAL INSTRUMENTS: EXTENSIONS OR MEDIA?

GIUSEPPE TORRE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

A large and bright room is where we walk into. We find five performers standing next to five instruments, evenly spaced out.[1]

1. a Steinway & Sons grand piano from 1893
2. a Duo-art reproducing roll from 1914
3. a Neo-Bechstein grand piano from 1930
4. a Minimoog Model-D analogue synth from 1970
5. a Nord Grand: digital piano from 2010

Here is the subsequent sequence of events:

Scene 1 (S1)

A performer seats in front of the Steinway & Sons grand piano and begins to play. His fingers move and press the keyboard keys. The sound reverberates in the room. Music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

Scene 2 (S2)

A performer approaches the Duo-Art piano. She grabs a paper roll with many holes; it is a musical score. She threads the paper-roll into its housing device, which sits above the keyboard. She sits down and uses her feet to move the pedals underneath the piano. The movement of her feet initiates the Duo-Art mechanical engine, and the roll begins to unfold. The mechanical parts moving produce a low-frequency hum that can be heard. The music starts after a few seconds, with the noise of the mechanism remaining in the background. Each time a hole on the paper roll meets the hole on the tracker, a note is triggered. As if a ghost is attending to them, the keys on the piano move automatically. Music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):150–169
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101519
ISSN 2057–7176

Scene 3 (S3)

A performer sits in front of the Neo-Bechstein piano. She begins to play. Her fingers move flawlessly when pressing the keys on the keyboard. The sound spreads in the room, but not as loudly as one would expect from a grand piano. Simultaneously, a 'louder' sound is perceived through a loudspeaker situated near the performer and away from the piano. This sound is derived from the amplified sound of the piano's strings, which is amplified by electric pickups whose signal has been transmitted via radio to the speaker. Music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

Scene 4 (S4)

A performer is sitting in front of the Minimoog Model D synth. He begins to play. His fingers move flawlessly when pressing the keys on the keyboard. One can observe that the keys on the keyboard are not as weighted as those on a grand piano. The fingers appear to meet less resistance in pushing the keys down. Sounds are heard coming from an external PA system. Music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

Scene 5 (S5)

A performer seats in front of the Nord Grand piano. She begins to play. Her fingers move flawlessly when pressing the keys on the keyboard. The keys appear to have the weight of those found in a grand piano. Sounds are heard coming from an external PA system. Music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

Introduction

How we tell each other stories is important. Beyond their identical conclusions, the five scenarios presented suffer from a lack of narrative variations. More variety would be desirable, but it is difficult to find it unless we look at the intricate connection between musicians and their own musical instruments. Yet, this complex relationship is often untold because music, and art in general, is primarily presented as a way of listening/experiencing, in which performers, audiences, composers/artists, cultural histories, instruments, social functions, and many other factors work as relational nodes.

Instead, I argue that there are critical differences to be told, not only for narrative improvements, but also, and more importantly, to highlight key aspects of the practice of the performer. To do so, the inner private (thus, highly subjective and in many respects hidden) space of the performer and their relation with their instrument must be brought to the fore.

Media theory, phenomenology, and post-phenomenology will play a major role in the way the argument will be laid out hereafter. In the first section, I contrast two views of musical instruments: as mediating tools between artistic intent and sound, and as embodied extensions of the performer. Media theory emphasizes technological mediation, while phenomenology sees no separation—instrument and body form a unified whole, making music an immediate, lived expression rather than a mediated act. In the second section, I draw on post-phenomenology to show how musical instruments can be both embodied extensions and mediating tools. Ihde's

account illustrates how instruments shape not only sound but our understanding of music. Technologies mediate experience, influencing cultural meaning and performance. Mediation and embodiment coexist, revealing the performer's active role in co-creating music with evolving tools. In the third section, the focus shifts back to the performer's embodied experience, emphasizing the body's central role in artistic creation. Drawing from Malafouris and Ihde, I propose two categories of instruments: embodied and hermeneutic. In the fourth part, I will show how embodied and hermeneutic relations emerge from the use of two classes of instrument: analogue, where instruments act as bodily extensions (e.g. acoustic pianos), and hermeneutic, where instruments translate action through layers of mediation (e.g. digital pianos). In the final section, I reflect on how this mediation inherent in digital instruments may result in a form of disembodiment, helping explain digital scepticism in the arts as something raising from ontological questions about self, materiality, and embodiment in contemporary artistic practice.

Tools, media, and the body

To begin with, I would like to suggest that one of the primary obstacles in appreciating the remarkable variety of the five case scenarios lies in the ambiguous identification of musical (or artistic) instruments as media; an umbrella term that, often uncritically, encompasses both analogue or digital instrumentation. This identification comes from extensive philosophical and media theory research of the 20th century, in which the sophistication of modern technology appears to afford something more than what mere tools do. It is a common perception to perceive a hammer as a tool; however, when examining contemporary devices—e.g. computers, synthesizers, tablets, cameras, tracking devices, sensory-motor instruments—their utilitarian attributes become increasingly intricate, resulting in a fundamental shift in the question of who holds responsibility for what. Tools become media when they begin to create, and occupy, a space between human intentions and actions. We could easily refer to all the simplest parts of a television set as tools,[2] but once they're all bundled together, we're looking at a highly sophisticated technological artefact, one that's displaying infrastructures and interfaces and whose complexity is barely reflected in the word 'tool'. Thus, we are starting to see technologies of mediation through which we now question our sense of control and supremacy. Marshall McLuhan's iconic work titled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* ([1964] 1994) is an eminent example in this direction. McLuhan appraised how an 'examination of the origin and development of the individual extensions of man should be preceded by a look at some general aspects of the media, or extensions of man, beginning with the never-explained numbness that each extension brings about in the individual and society' (24). It is this notion of numbness that encapsulates the dilemma discussed here, wherein we, as Narcissus for McLuhan, have failed to comprehend that technology mirrors us, and thus we have become the 'servomechanism' of our extended or repeated image. In other words, we have begun to objectify ourselves within a technological infrastructure that uses us more than what we might think we use of it. This objectification of the subject is particularly evident in contemporary aesthetic theories informed by the philosophies of Deleuze ([1980] 1987) and Latour ([1991] 1993), such as speculative realism (MacKay 2018).

Somehow, this appreciation of the power struggle between man and media remains underplayed within the pair performers—technological instruments where the idea of medium is often used for its perhaps less problematic meaning, namely, a means by which intents are mediated. The technological determinism of much media theory finds here its opponent in the social constructivism of aesthetic theories.[3] And yet, if an instrument is thought of as the intermediary between a sender and a receiver, or intentions and their realization, a notion of medium comes to the fore. A medium is a forum by which two parties connect and negotiate their differences. I present here the case of musical instruments, well aware that the discourse can be extended to the relationship performer—instruments defining many other art practices, to then ask: which musical instruments listed in our five scenarios function as mediators? Are they media? And if so, what do they really mediate? In what ways does such a mediation affect a practice?

If, in a somewhat romantic manner, we desire to consider our musical instruments as a means by which we can establish a connection with the realm of musical ideas, then it is true that all of our instruments are media. This notion holds a significant position in contemporary literature, particularly with regard to digital art in general and not solely music (Dixon 2015; Manovich 2001; Paul [2003] 2015; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003). Our instruments serve as a medium between our ideas and their concrete realization. Thus, musical instruments facilitate the production of contingent instantiations of musical objects, such as music compositions, derived from some ideal musical forms (either metaphysical or concrete according to one's own philosophical preferences). From this perspective, the manner in which such a mediation may occur remains largely irrelevant. This is the genesis of the narrative suffering that underlies the depiction of our five scenarios. As all instruments are media through which the artist's ideas and intentions materialise for aesthetic enjoyment and discourse, the only thing that matters is that music flows beautifully and effortlessly.

In this context, it should also be appreciated how this predilection for the object of art, which relegates tools to serving as intermediaries in its realization, does not belong to traditional aesthetics only. It also belongs to research concerned with the constitutive features of experience in a conscious subject, phenomenology. The passage below is from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> Between the musical essence of the piece such as it is indicated in the score and the music that actually resonates around the organ, such a direct relationship is established that the body of the organist and the instrument are nothing other than the place of passage of this relation. From then on, the music exists for itself, and everything else exists through it. There is no place here for a 'memory' of the location of the stops, and the organist does not play within objective space. In fact, his rehearsal gestures are gestures of consecration: they put forth affective vectors, they discover emotional sources, and they create an expressive space, just as the gestures of the augur define the templum. (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012, 147)

Merleau-Ponty considers the body and the instrument as a place of passage, where what is to be passed are gestures that, as affective vectors, become music.[4]

The similarities between what Merleau-Ponty calls 'place of passage' and a generic definition of media as mediator (e.g., McLuhan) or a means to an end (see contemporary literature referenced above) are unavoidable. Yet, it must be noted, the phenomenological perspective offers us something more nuanced as a medium or tool: the body and the instrument, as a whole. For Merleau-Ponty, our experience of the world is always the inexhaustible synthesis made by our bodily being-in-the-world (140). Our instruments are not apprehended through the definition of an a priori cognition and execution of individualised facts or rules. We do not move around procedurally as computer code would while executing the list of instructions comprising a program. To play a note on any of the pianos in our five scenarios, the performer does not have to go through a sequence of objective spatial positions for their fingers, arms, and body (e.g. raise the arm by x°, make a 90° angle with your elbow, extend the index finger, etc.) nor manually programme some device. The same thing happens when I act on the pedals of a reproducing piano. My body never relates to an external, objective, spatial reality. My body is the expressive means by which I am-in-the-world.

When Merleau-Ponty asserts that my body serves as 'the general means for having a world' (147), he is not implying that my body functions as a mediator between myself and the external world. Rather, he states that my body serves as the instrument through which I can have a world.[5] Under this light, the instrument becomes an 'extension of man' with a whole new meaning from the one proposed by McLuhan for whom extension is effectively mediation purporting a degree of 'numbness' in its user (i.e. technological determinism). Its extensive character now refers to a new and expanded capacity for the body to direct an intentional arc towards a musical object, e.g., a music composition.

According to this reading of Merleau-Ponty, then, my relationship with an instrument, as an object of the world into which I am thrown in, is not mediatable because there is no gap to be filled nor to be mediated between my body and the world. Instead, I embody my instrument and the world. Similarly to the cane for the blind person (144) or the organ for the organist (146), the instrument becomes, in unity with the body, 'an appendage of the body, an extension of the bodily synthesis' (154). Likewise, when the performers attend to each of the five pianos, their respective instruments become an extension of their bodies through which they expressively experience *their own* bodily being-in-the-world. Embodiment necessitates immediateness, and for that purpose, embodiment is not only immediate, but in fact, *unmediatable*.

Through this brief exposition, we have brought to attention two distinct perspectives. One perspective considers the instrument as a medium because it mediates between the artist's intentions and the musical outcomes (performer → instrument → music). A second perspective, which is more phenomenologically oriented, regards the embodied unity between performer and instrument (which is now thought of as an extension of the body) as a media because it mediates between score and music, or intents and outcomes (musical idea → performer-instrument → music).

Either and both

There are two ways to understand mediation: one where the medium appears as the instrument, and another where the medium appears as the embodied unity of the non-mediable compound body-instrument. And yet, the question on the table is: can musical instruments be at once media and an extension of a body? Post-phenomenological literature provides some interesting suggestions on the matter. This is mainly due to an approach in which, by connecting phenomenology and philosophy of science, a more pragmatic understanding of technology emerges. In this context, Don Idhe's relational ontology would schematically depict the events of our five case scenarios as follows:

$$\text{human} \Rightarrow \text{piano} \Rightarrow \text{music}^{6}$$

Ihde's schematisation hints at a definition of technological instruments as tools of mediation, with a slight distancing from the notion of instruments as extensions of the body. He describes this as a multipart relation guided by an 'intentionality which is directed, mediated through a material instrument—a technology' (Ihde 2007b, 11). Ihde explains that the way an instrument acts as a mediator is especially evident during the learning process. The pupil will initially struggle to reconcile their musical intentions with their musical results. Time and practice will allow for obstacles to be overcome. Yet, one must consider that the instrument is not solely played. Through such a co-creative relationship, we come to shape what music is or could be. Musical instruments aid and influence us in creating music while also having a significant impact on our understanding of what music is, just as technology aids us and influences our questions in our pursuit of an understanding of the universe. Ihde always emphasizes the intentional arc between performer and sound, but the instrument is a medium because it is both a means to make music and a tool that shapes our understanding of what music is. For this reason, by acknowledging the non-neutral character of technology, Idhe affords technological instruments a form of material hermeneutics that is historically situated (Ihde 2009, 75).

From an Ihdean perspective, our five scenarios would present differences that relate to the various possibilities each instrument affords in embodying sound while also mediating our understanding of what music is or could be. Our five case-scenarios are *phenomenological variants* (Ihde [1976] 2007a, 263), each of which is characterised by the presence of musical instruments of various order of technical and relational complexity. Within this approach to the history of technology that Ihde calls 'technoscience', three categories are identified within the human-instrument-music triad: a 'direct bodily production (singing-dancing variants), a body-instrument variant, and then the "constructed" add-ons to simple instruments which includes recording technologies (260). The five pianos in our five case scenario can be found to belong to either the category of 'body-instrument variants' or the 'constructed add-on of recording means'. Via these two categories, an Ihdean-technoscientific study would present an interesting history line. Indeed, if the discriminatory factor is some sort of recording technology, we would then have:

- ‘body-instrument variant’
  - a Steinway & Sons grand piano (1853)
  - a Neo-Bechstein grand piano (1930s)
  - a Minimoog analogue synth (1970)
- ‘constructed add-on of recording means’
  - a Duo-art reproducing roll (1914)
  - a Nord Grand digital piano (2010)

However, two elements, at least, are disrupting an otherwise linear history of piano instruments. The first is that the Neo-Bechstein and the Minimoog, despite their ‘electrification’ of sounds, are incapable of recording them. From this perspective, it would appear that the impact of analogue and digital synthesizers on music would be of a minor magnitude in comparison to the one attributed to recording technology. While orders of magnitude are debatable, this perspective does appear to favour certain technical affordances, e.g. the capacity to record over the one of increasing sonic possibilities (Eno [1979] 2004) for no clear reasons. The second element is that the Duo-Art is a recording device that, though rudimentary in its deployment of paper rolls, largely expands the possibilities of both what can be done with a piano and what piano music is. For example, the piano roll ‘Shepherd’s Hey’ for Pianola from 1914 arranged by Percy Grainger pushes the limits of piano-playing beyond the possibilities of the human hands (Gupta 2009). Under this light, this experimentalism is equivalent to the one adopted by Frank Zappa in *Jazz from Hell* (1986) for which he used a computer operating a Synclavier (a digital synthesiser).

My point is that *postmodernity* (Ihde [1976] 2007a, 260-261), an important landmark in Ihde’s technoscience that identifies a new era in technological development, can hardly be signposted by recording technology. This landmark is too loose and misses too much within the highly diverse history of musical instruments.

At the same time, it is fair to say that Ihde’s true interest is not to reconstruct a linear history of music’s technologies. Furthermore, his post-phenomenological approach does not necessitate it. He uses phenomenological variants to illustrate how instruments mediate between musical intentions and musical outcomes without abandoning the embodiment of that instrument. Technoscience is an approach that aims to show how technological complexity produces many questions that neither embodiment nor mediation alone can answer. On one hand, we must acknowledge the validity of the phenomenological theories of embodiment; yet, on the other hand, we must account for some form of mediation that such tools bring back because of their sophistication. Hence, I would in the end contend that Ihde’s emphasis on recording techniques only demonstrates an implicit predilection towards the perspective of the listener rather than that of the musician/performer. As his work wishes to provide useful insights into the musicians’ inner experience of embodiment with musical instruments, the accent ultimately falls on musics as perceived by spectators and embodied by (other) humans.[7] This is, perhaps, the most important aspect to keep in mind in the present discussion, and something we will attempt to overcome by refocusing on the perspective of the performer.

To summarize, musical instruments can be embodied, yet, thought of as media, they connect not only score and music (as in Merleau-Ponty), but also continuously intervene in the cultural processes that define what music is (as in Ihde). From a post-phenomenological perspective, a musical instrument can perhaps be embodied, but this must go hand in hand with the cognitive and socio-cultural aspects that it brings with it. This is to say, the instrument *mediates*, though it does so without suffering the kind of technological determinism a la McLuhan.

Aesthetics and pragmatism

One problem with Ihde's idea of the musician-instrument-technology triad is that it can be mistaken for a phenomenology of music or an alien phenomenology a la Ian Bogost, where the aliens would be either the musical instruments or music.[8] Yet, I claim that Ihde's relational ontology remains relevant for an analysis of the performer-instrument relationship and for a questioning of the embodiment and/or medial processes at hand—at least in some respects. We need, though, a narrower attentional shift. The departure point for a relational ontology of aesthetic practices should at least remain close to the perspective of the performer. We must reconnect with the hands and the body of the performer as they manipulate the instrument. We need to recuperate the centrality of the human body and the significance of its movement (van den Berg [1955] 1987). Likewise, we require an approach that, stirring away from the primacy of the output and the primacy of the idea/concept that we have learnt to emphasise since at least Duchamp,[9] follows a path similar to that offered by Lambros Malafouris' (2013) studies on the primal material aspects subtending the relationship between artist and clay. Rather than wanting to de-throne the subject (MacKay 2018), we need to recuperate the centrality of the self and the ways in which art is a practice that interrogates it.

Within this framework, it becomes important to identify those elements that mediate an otherwise embodied experience in the performer-instrument relationship. Ihde's four-parts schematisation of the human-technology relation remains , to some extent, a step in this direction. Though relating to a discourse that concerns scientific tools, Ihde (2009, 43-44) accounts for four types of relations: embodiment relations (extension of the body, i.e. looking at the sky through the lenses of a traditional telescope), hermeneutic relations (interpretative thus mediating, i.e. looking at the sky through an infrared telescope), alterity relations (apparently dialogical but de facto means to act in the world, i.e. human-robot relation) and background relations (technology becomes seamlessly part of the world, i.e. acting on a light switch).[10]

For the remit of the present discussion on musical instruments, I will now consider only the embodied and hermeneutic types of relations. The reason is that, as Ihde sees alterity relations as ultimately leading to hermeneutic ones, so I would be inclined to see background relations as ultimately leading to bodily ones. To say that technology disappears in the background means that, for a body, there is no difference between flicking a light switch and throwing a stone. Ihde makes a distinction on the basis that a stone isn't a technological artifact. However, my inclination is to accept true disappearance only when the category of technology disappears too. From a performer's perspective, the difference between a stone and a musical instrument is an

afterthought that does not interfere with the pre-cognitive immediacy of the experience or its intentional form. Anything and everything takes part in the co-construction of their bodily being-in-the-world. One can throw a stone without aiming to make a ripple in a pool, just as one can flick a switch without wanting to turn the light on or hit a string without wanting to play a solo concerto.[11]

Embodied instruments

Our post-phenomenological analysis has led us to two modes of describing the performer's relations with a musical instrument: an embodied modality in which the instrument is an extension of the body and a hermeneutic modality in which the instrument mediates our relationship with music. Hence, in embodied relations the instrument is extension, while in hermeneutic ones the instrument is a medium.

However, even to this point, our question remains unanswered. Are musical instruments extension or media? I argue that Ihde's post-phenomenology fails to provide the answer because it falls victim to an excessive romanticisation of music and arts. In a similar critique to that which Ihde reserves for Heidegger's romanticisation of technology, I am critiquing Ihde for his romanticisation of aesthetics. Instead of considering instruments in relation to their ability to make music, as Ihde does, we should consider the performer's relationship with their instrument as a practice, detached, at least initially, from aesthetic issues and/or intents. On this path, I propose to reduce the performer's practice to a simple intentional act directed towards the world, or an act, perhaps, in which the manipulation of the world is oriented towards (or inform) a renewed sense of self.

My (existential) pragmatism does away, then, with notions of skills, virtuosity, and alike. This is not to suggest that there is no difference between the novice and the master. Rather, it is to say that skills are a consequence of a long-lasting relationship with the instrument rather than a defining character of the relation or condition for embodiment. Skills are not a prerequisite for embodying the world, since we are always thrown into it. From this perspective, the performer's instrument should be seen like the blind person's cane (see Merleau-Ponty) or Galileo's telescope (see Ihde). For the blind person, the cane is an extension of their own body for navigating the world. For the astronomer, the telescope is an extension of the body to see what is further away. And for the performer, the piano is an extension of the body in ways that account for the way in which the entire sensory apparatus of the body dialogues with the materiality of the instrument. That is to say that the priority is given at the level of the body-instrument material relation first, sounds comes after, and music certainly comes last.[12] The performer, the blind person, and the astronomer embody their instruments as a means for having/exploring a world. This type of embodiment is distinguished not by mediation but rather by a pre-reflective synthesis and a direct engagement with the instrument and the environment. There exists a unity between the performer and their instrument, implying that, as an extension of the body, the instrument cannot serve as a medium simply because there is nothing requiring mediation.

Ihde's embodied relations are grounded on this understanding too. Certain technologies are integrated into the physical experience of the individual by directly engaging their perceptual apparatus. For instance, Galileo observes the stars through his telescope rather than directly gazing at them. As Ihde (2009, 42) says, in embodied relations, technology 'is a means of experience, not an object of experience in use.' Technology is somehow transparent while at once mediating our understanding of the world. For me, however, the unity between performer and instrument does not mediate an understanding of musics but only expresses the *bodily being (certainly in-a-sonic-world, too)* of the performer. Embodied relations are transparent and pre-reflective, and for which the engagement with the sensory apparatus of the body is immediate and unmediated.

Hermeneutic instruments

Hermeneutic relations, instead, require a form of translation. As we have seen, Ihde talks about hermeneutic relations when highly sophisticated instruments help humans to understand the world beyond the limits of their sensorial apparatus. The modern telescope, for example, is more than just a series of lenses as it was in Galileo's time. Infrared telescopes are capable of sensing frequencies beyond the observable range of the human sensory system and converting them into visible images, thus making them perceivable to humans. It is this kind of major technological advancement that defines, for Ihde, postmodern times. And it is this translating capability between different orders of perception that defines hermeneutic relations. In Ihde's (2009, 56) words, modern telescopes translate in that they bring about 'a technological transformation of a phenomenon into a [human] readable' one.

> So the first postmodern capacity, as I shall call it, of the second revolution is the capacity to image phenomena not able to be experienced by the body, not perceptible at all—to direct bodily sensory capacities. But such phenomena are able to be do [sic.] become experienced if they are technologically, instrumentally mediated. Allow me to make the point much more strongly: without instrumental mediation, no experience of such phenomena is possible at all—no instruments, no science. (Ihde 2009, 57)

Ihde draws attention to the unique and non-bypassable capacity of modern technology to affect our field of perception while placing itself between us and the world. If in the antiquities we could only look at the sky with our naked eyes (embodied relation with the world), from Galileo's times, a series of lenses made the sky bigger and closer to us (extended embodiment). In modern times, the technology at our disposal begins to register phenomena beyond the capabilities of our own eyes, such as infrared telescopy. This latter technology does not extend the limits of our sight abilities, but it rather extends our apprehension of the world through the very readings that those 'advanced' instruments provide to us. This relation, for Ihde, is both embodied and hermeneutic at once. Thus, the post-phenomenology of Ihde seeks to account simultaneously for both the mediating and embodying aspects of this relation by introducing skills (where he sees embodiment) and musics (where he sees media).

Despite the aforementioned factors, it is evident that, from an Ihdean perspective derived from his studies on science (and not music), there are no discernible distinctions between the five pianos in the scenarios presented at the outset. If one is content with the statement that instruments are means to create music, then the intrinsic properties of the instruments are secondary. To summarize, if the objective is to create music, the decision of whether to label instruments as a medium or an extension may be intriguing from a scholastic standpoint, but not from a pragmatic one. Nonetheless, it has been observed that a post-phenomenological approach distinguishes, at least more noticeably in the realm of science studies, between instruments that can be embodied and those that necessitate hermeneutic efforts. This difference is important for both theory and practice when seen from the performer's standpoint. Would a performer be more comfortable in claiming that they embody their instrument or that it mediates their gestures? Are there any musical instruments that can be referred to as hermeneutic, so that our musical instruments can be referred to as media?

Inner mechanics

The only way to answer these questions is to look at the mechanics of the five pianos, which is to look at the mechanical principles behind the co-creation of sounds. A close-up look at the five pianos of each case scenario will reveal that the operational mechanisms in each of the five pianos are:

- Steinway & Sons grand piano → mechanical
- Duo-art reproducing roll → mechanical[13]
- Neo-Bechstein grand piano → mechanical and electrical
- Minimoog Model-D → mechanical and electrical
- Nord Grand → mechanical and electrical

The analysis indicates that there are two kinds of instruments: mechanical and mechanical-electrical. Nevertheless, this classification would not help us to answer our question because neither of the two classes would, by this very definition, be said to bring about hermeneutic relations. In fact, one might see again only embodied relations, since such a broad comprehension of the forces at work fails to offer us anything relevant to the potential deployment of translating efforts. In S1 and S2, the human body's energy flows through the mechanical parts of pianos. But the same can be said for S3, S4, and S5, where mechanical forces are turned into electrical ones. In other words, the performers see and perceive that when a finger acts on the key, a corresponding sound is created. Once again, we are confined to the realm of embodied relations, and no piano can be considered a medium in the eyes of the performer.

Regardless, the path we have chosen has not yet ended. Let's then look at the deeper details of how the pianos work. In S3, the mechanical energy flows from the finger via the piano key to the mallets and hammers that hit the strings. As in S1 and S2, the sound of the vibrating string resonates throughout the room. But in S3, there's something more. The mechanical energy of a vibrating string is converted into electric energy by tiny pick-ups. This electrical signal will traverse

a path that will ultimately result in its transformation into mechanical energy, which will propel the cone of the speaker, amplifying the sound of the vibrating string. The transformation from mechanical to electrical (and back) is said to be *analogous*, meaning that there is a continuous and directly proportional relationship between the two forms of energy transduced.

In S4, the two-way transmutation from mechanical to electrical type energies also occurs, but in different places. The mechanical energy moves from the finger to the piano key, which in this instance, acts as a trigger mechanism to alter the current flow.[14] The current flow can also be manually adjusted using the numerous dials and switches usually found on many synths. The electrical signal will then proceed along a path that will eventually lead to its re-emergence as mechanical energy, thereby influencing the speaker's cone and generating sounds. In the case scenario discussed here (S1, S2, S3, and S4), we are in the presence of *analogue instruments*, where the direct proportionality of the energy and forces at play allows for a fully *embodied relation* and, hence, the instruments can be thought of as an *extension of the body*.

Something different can be said about S5, however. Mechanical and electrical energy are flowing, but the electrical flow undergoes a different manipulation. In a Nord Stage, the finger triggers a mechanism that actuates a current flow in a more complex fashion than the one present in a MiniMoog Model D. In a Nord Stage, the keys are attached to circuitry that will transform an electrical signal into data. The electrical signal is encoded through a process of quantification of the voltages measured at brief intervals of time that are regulated by a central clock. The energy of the finger pressing a key does not directly connect to the sound production mechanisms of the piano. There are no strings, no hammers, no continuous flow of electricity standing in a constant and direct proportionality with the force exerted by the fingers. Instead, when a finger presses down a key, it triggers electrical switches hosted beneath the keyboard, which create small voltages. These voltages are converted into numerical values by an analogue-to-digital converter (ADC). From this point on, the gesture becomes a number represented by a sequence of high and low voltages (binary digits, i.e. bits). A numerical sequence that the digital circuitry manipulates through means that are largely autonomous from the performer's actions. The fact that these binary sequences will be converted back into a continuous electrical signal, causing the speaker's cone to oscillate and thus generating sound, should not be taken at face value. If our gestures make sounds instead of sending an email, it is just a coincidence (or incidental, to use a McLuhan's informed language) and only demonstrates our faith in the manufacturer's goodwill. A number can do many things, but it is the essence of nothing in particular!

The fundamental mechanism of all devices that we refer to as digital expresses the forces at work through logico-numerical processes. Digital instruments do not operate through the principle of direct proportionality as analogue instruments do. Furthermore, whereas in analogue instruments the path that the flow of energy follows is explicit and can be inspected by the hardware circuitry in use, in digital instruments the hardware circuitry can offer little clues as to its internal operations. One needs to examine the software. And it is this software that then brings and bridges to the senses another order of reality, one that is solely mathematically driven. In S5, we are in the presence of a *digital instrument* whose operational mechanics translate from one register to

another. In S5, the relationship between performer and instrument is a *hermeneutic relation* and, hence, the instrument can be called a *medium*.

Analogue vs digital—again

Our search for potential elements that could bring to the forefront forms of hermeneutic relations between performers and musical instruments culminated in a distinction between analogue and digital instruments. In doing so, the present study revitalises the old analogue digital debate (Goodman [1968] 1978; Lewis 1971) in ways that more recent literature has done too (Fazi 2018, 2019; Galloway 2021, 2022; Maley 2011; Massumi 2002; Torre 2020; Torre and Pellizzer in-press).

We have achieved these results after abandoning a post-phenomenological understanding of embodiment in which, as Ihde (2009, 45) says, 'all science, in its production of knowledge, is technologically embodied.' Furthermore, Idhe's understanding of embodied-hermeneutic relations is only viable if we introduce socio-cultural elements to the relational triad, namely musics. Only in these cases, all relations, including hermeneutic ones, are, for Ihde, also embodied.

We, on the other hand, employed a slight variation on the post-phenomenological approach, focusing on the exclusive interaction between a musician and their musical devices, without regard to the sociocultural contexts in which the sounds produced come to be. The focus was solely on the physical interaction between the body of the performer and the materiality of the musical instrument. In doing so, we identified a new landmark of postmodernity within a reworked technoscience of musical instruments: the advent of digital musical instruments (DMIs). Not recording technologies, then, nor 'gobbledygook', as Ihde would describe digital data (Ihde, 2009, p.57). Our landmark was instead given by the peculiar mechanism that is intrinsic and essential to all digital devices: a time-sensitive and logico-quantitative encoding of voltage flows.

In analogue instruments, such as those in S1, S2, S3, and S4, there is a direct and unmediated relationship between the performers' gestures and the sound produced. There is no logocentric translation deployed in their use. The fundamental essence of the instruments lies in the continuity and transparency of their cause-effect mechanisms. The absence of any translation apparatus makes analogue instruments conducive to embodied connections. The symbolic domain is not a central feature of our experience. An analogue instrument facilitates a body-instrument unity, which is pre-conditioned to thought. As long as the relationship between mechanical and electrical energy is analogous, an instrument is an extension of the performer's body.

In the presence of digital instruments, instead, the idea of embodiment becomes problematic. This is especially so within the phenomenological framework of a mind-body unity and an engagement with the materiality of the instrument at hand. This is because, the mechanical forces exerted by the performer's fingers on the keys of the digital piano (S5) do not stand in an analogous or directly proportional relation with the electrical signals. In fact, they are not in relation because the subtending translation mechanics from one register (physical) to another (physical-numerical)

renders the performer's gestures largely anonymous. Simply put, a gesture given in numerical form cannot be said to belong to anyone specifically or uniquely.[15]

Digital musical instruments are the only instruments capable of generating hermeneutic relationships, as the correlation between gesture and sound is mediated by time-sensitive quantities that are made accessible to arbitrary logico-quantitative methods of manipulation. To put it simply, if the sound of a grand piano string is a necessary outcome of an unmediated cause-effect mechanism linking performers and sound, in digital instruments the sound is merely an incidental outcome of the performers' gestures. Once a gesture is translated into numbers, it can then be mapped to anything at all while anything that cannot be described by numbers simply does not exist in and for the digital universe.

The point is that digital music instruments necessitate signification and translation (i.e. time sensitive logico-quantitative encoding) as a prerequisite for their existence and relational affordances. Thus, a lack of digital syntax means that there are no sounds, gestures, or anything at all. As a performer of the digital, one cannot simply claim a direct connection to sound because the connection is arbitrary. The cause-effect mechanism is interjected in the middle by a mediator, for whom nothing can exist without being expressed in numerical terms. This logocentric spiral that digital instruments create makes it difficult to accept that hermeneutic relations are also embodied. Or perhaps, as many might be inclined to say, embodiment and the unity between body and world is established with the output generated by the digital instrument (e.g. sound) and not the servo mechanisms that generated it. However, if so, we should either stop talking about media, or clarify why many digital tools and/or infrastructures are media while digital (art) instruments are not. To claim that a digital instrument is a medium means to acknowledge the importance of hermeneutic relationships over embodied ones, with all the positive or negative consequences that this might bring about. The interpretative and mediating nature brought about by digital instruments disrupts and undermines the otherwise seamless, pre-cognitive, and unified relationship with the instrument at the very material level which said relationship originates from.

This state of affairs may be at the heart of a widespread distrust of digital devices in many art practices. For example, it is rare, if not impossible, to see digital pianos used in the public execution of classical piano and/or orchestral repertoire. This is not necessarily because one wants to be faithful to a past. If that were the case, Beethoven's piano repertoire would be played on a piano with 76 keys, whereas most modern pianos have 88.[16] It is also not because the sound of a digital piano isn't as good as that of a grand piano; nowadays, it is hard for many to tell if what heard comes from a digital or a grand piano. The non-negotiability of the use of a grand piano in classical concerts is due to an implicit recognition of that special relationship between the performer and the analogue/embodied affordances of the grand piano. This is a material relationship that emphasizes the agential supremacy of the performer, and that digital instruments cannot offer because their mediating nature flattens agency to a middle/egalitarian point between performer and technology.[17] The emphasis, indeed, that contemporary aesthetics places on notions of network, rhizome, intermedia spaces, object-agency, and latency speaks to the unavoidable

ontological flattening that hermeneutic/digital tools force upon the relationship between performer and instrument.[18]

But it should be evident that a relational egalitarianism does not imply a unity of the parts relating. It is in this context that the mediating essence of digital instruments renders embodiment highly problematic. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this tension comes from an acclaimed body performance artist such as Orlan, who, towards the conclusion of her career and well into the digital era, regards a 3D digital rendering of her body as 'representative of all [her] work' (delle Zattere 2014). This is certainly a strange claim for a body performer. However, it is one which, as Orlan claims, is informed by a desire to escape the decay of the body by betraying its physical/embodied form to offer it to the numerically driven (representational, thus external) digital realm. This is to say, Orlan must disembody her body and put faith in the immortality of numbers, even if this means forever dissociating those numbers from the conscious/embodied subject that they represent.

Digital instruments act as mediators, and thus they are media. However, it is also important to emphasize that digital embodiment may remain an illusion—caught between a denial of physical reality and a diminishing appreciation for the distinction between reality and the limits of how we choose to represent it.

Case scenarios—again

I would like to end by presenting a revised version of the five stories at the beginning of this article. This version uses the first person, as often required by phenomenological studies, and gives a more nuanced look at the different relationships discussed so far.

Scene 1* (S1-Grand Piano)

I take a seat in front of the piano and sit down. I commence my playing. I perceive the touch of the keys beneath my fingertips as I press them. Through their weight, I feel the energy I exert on the strings, which begin to vibrate. The sound spreads throughout the room. The sound and movement of the strings also reverberates throughout the body of the piano, down to my fingertips and my entire body. In this continuous flow, the piano is not a medium, but an unmediated extension of my body. In my playing, I perceive through the piano as I perceive through my body. I embody the piano, and in this unity I can express my musical intentions. With my body and its extension, I sense and coexist in a pre-reflexive unity. Within this unity of body and instrument, I express my bodily being-in-a-sonic world.

Scene 2* (S2-Duo Art Piano)

I take a seat in front of the piano and sit down. I take a paper-roll. I realize that it has many holes on it, and I know they represent a music score. I thread the paper-roll into its housing device, which is above the keyboard in the body of the piano. I start to move the pedals underneath the piano with my feet. This will move the clogs and rolls internal to the Duo-Art. I listen to the low-level noise of the mechanical part moving while the paper is unrolled. After a few seconds, the music starts

while the noise of the mechanism stays in the background. The piano's keys move automatically, as if a ghost were attending to them. The keys move the hammer, which hits the strings and makes the sound like a grand piano would. I feel almost detached from the instrument, as if I were a spectator to it, but my foot movement makes it feel like mine. I breathe with the piano and in this unity of body and instrument, I express my bodily being-in-a-sonic world.[19]

Scene 3* (S3-Neo-Bechstein)

I take a seat in front of the piano and sit down. I commence my playing. I perceive the touch of the keys beneath my fingertips as I press them. Through their weight, I feel the energy I exert on the strings, which begin to vibrate. The sound spread throughout the room, though not as loud as I would expect from a grand piano. The sound and movement of the strings also reverberates throughout the body of the piano, down to my fingertips and my entire body. At the same time, a louder sound comes back to me through a loudspeaker placed near me. This sound is the result of the piano strings being amplified by electric pickups, whose signal was transmitted through radio to the speaker. In this continuous flow, the piano is not a medium, but an unmediated extension of my body. In my playing, I perceive through the piano as I perceive through my body. I embody the piano, and in this unity I can express my musical intentions. With my body and its extension, I sense and coexist in a pre-reflexive unity. Within this unity of body and instrument, I express my bodily being-in-a-sonic world.

Scene 4* (S4-MiniMoog)

I take a seat in front of the piano and sit down. I commence my playing. I perceive the touch of the keys beneath my fingertips as I press them. I feel their weight, even though I recognize that they are not weighted like in a grand piano. I cannot feel the power of my hitting the keys translating to anything mechanical. Indeed, the act of pressing the key initiates an electrical signal whose flow will affect a whole range of oscillators and gates, thereby generating sounds. The sound that is generated makes my body reverberate, but that reverberation is not coming from the instrument itself, but from the PA system. I cannot help but notice the fact that the lack of direct transformation of my mechanical energy into some mechanical form prevents an important tactile mode of feeling the instrument as truly an extension of my body. In this continuous flow, the analogue synth is not a medium, but an unmediated extension of my body, even though parts of my body have been displaced to some point away from my touch and closer to the speakers. In my playing, I perceive through the analogue synth as I perceive through my body. I embody the synth, and in this unity I can express my musical intentions. With my body and its extension, I sense and coexist in a pre-reflexive unity. Within this unity of body and instrument, I express my bodily being-in-a-sonic world.

Scene 5* (S5-NordGrand)

I take a seat in front of the piano and sit down. I commence my playing. I perceive the touch of the keys beneath my fingertips as I press them. I sense their weight, despite my inability to perceive the force of my pressing the keys translating into mechanical action beyond the very key itself. There is no mechanical force emanating from the sound-generating mechanism to my fingertips. My body feels the sounds as coming from the PA system. In such circumstances, the piano feels like an extension of my body, although parts of my body feel displaced away from my touch by the

speakers' presence. I embody the piano, and in this unity I am able to express my musical intentions. With my body and its extension, I sense and coexist in a pre-reflexive unity. Within this unity of body and instrument, I express my bodily being-in-a-sonic world.

But at one point, I realise the representational, and thence arbitrary, nature of the entire sound-producing mechanism at the heart of my digital instrument. I stop. That awareness is paralysing. I now know that all of my gestures are encoded and translated within a logico-numerical register that anonymises my gestures. My actions on the keys are nothing more than a triggering of commands. Those commands open a gap between the input (my gesture) and the output (the resulting sound). Those commands mediate. My relation with the instrument is hermeneutic. Through the digital medium, the indissoluble unity of the cause-effect mechanism linking gesture and sound is lost, and it becomes a vicarious illusion—that is, virtual. The embodiment vanishes in this figment. How can I effectively bridge this gap to perceive myself in sound?

Notes

[1] The intention is not to suggest a hierarchy between instrument design, but rather to give the reader the chance to discover the inner workings of each instrument. Those technical aspects will become of paramount importance in this article. The instruments chosen work as a case in point for a larger class of instruments of the same kind.

[2] For instance, a hot cathode, which is a component of an electron gun, and is present in a CRT device in a television set, is a tool or instrument that facilitates the generation of electrons from heat.

[3] The debate between technological and social constructivism is presented extensively in both media theory and philosophy. The main question is whether technology is causing social changes or the other way around. While McLuhan is considered a proponent of the former, an important voice that has advocated for the latter is Adorno ([1970] 2020; [1977] 1986). The depth of the debate can be appreciated through an analysis of the works of Heidegger ([1954] 1996), Marcuse (1964), and Feenberg (1999).

[4] In a similar vein, Heidegger recognized poetry as the medium of excellence for conveying the deeper connections that attest to our being-thrown-into-the-world. In his 1954 essay titled "The Question Concerning Technology", Heidegger ([1954] 1996) posits that the essence of technology transcends mere technicality, implying that it encompasses more than mere instrumentality or a means to an end. Rather, technology is a destining of revealing (Enframing) that necessitates our attention to discover an escape route for the entrapment of technology within its own metaphysical reading and history. This escape route is provided by art, specifically 'poetic revealing' (35). Moreover, in this particular context, Feenberg (1999) critiques this perspective by describing it as 'quasi-transcendental', implying that Heidegger perceives reality as a structured object under control, to which humans are subordinated.

[5] Merleau-Ponty's work is an attempt to reposition the transcendental nature of consciousness that was derived from Cartesian thought into a 'transcendental field' wherein experience and consciousness are co-created within the inextricable unity of a subject, their body, and their world.

[6] Ihde (2007b, 10) uses a flute to exemplify his argument hence: human ⇒ flute ⇒ music.

[7] 'Musics', in its plural form, is used by Ihde to stress the manyfold ways in which its culture can take shape.

[8] As mentioned in the introduction, much contemporary literature tends to flatten the hierarchy between

conscious subjects and the world of things (e.g., Bogost 2012). From postmodernism to posthumanism, from object-oriented ontology to speculative realism—and, in certain respects, post-phenomenology—the subject is increasingly seen as embedded within a network of things, losing its dominant position. Relations *between* things (or "agents") become more significant than the human relationship *with* things. This tension is particularly evident in the debate between phenomenology and speculative realism (see Zahavi 2016). Although I acknowledge that these two schools of thought share more common ground than one might expect (see Girardi 2016), my perspective is predominantly phenomenological. Humility toward the world should not result in the annihilation of the self—especially in the arts. Art cannot exist without a conscious subject performing it.

[9] I define the attitude of aesthetic studies, which gives primacy to digital output, such as sound, visual, and tactile, as 'output essentialist' (Torre 2020).

[10] One might wonder why Ihde's schematisation of the 'human-flute-music' relation does not comply with any of the formal schematics offered in his larger and most famous body of work that is concerned with science. The publication dates of the two works are too close to consider the Peking University lectures (Ihde 2009) as a further advancement in Ihde's philosophy.

[11] In this instance, I am not arguing against the intentionality of an action, but rather stating that the intention of an action does not necessitate explicitness nor any teleological framework. We shouldn't confuse intention with intent. The first describes a general feature intrinsic and pre-cognitive of our bodily being-in-the-world, while the latter describes a conscious motivation for a given action.

[12] Perhaps the case of Evelyn Glennie (1993; 2003) might help to understand the sort of material relation in which the performer's body and their instrument are engaged in. Or perhaps, it is worth mentioning the pedagogical emphasis that Oscar Ghiglia placed on the body when playing/touching the guitar. I received this teaching from Marco Cappelli, a pupil of Ghiglia.

[13] Or mechanical and electrical since, some models of Duo-Art could be operated electromechanically too.

[14] In the Minimoog, the keys are contact keys, which are essentially switches.

[15] Similarly, the issue of anonymity of internauts is not a result of the web infrastructure tout court, but of the logico-quantitative essence of its infrastructure.

[16] Those who are interested in the faithful reproduction of music should look into the field of historically informed performances. An eminent example is the work of Tom Beghin (2024).

[17] In a different vein, this mediation presence has long been a concern for engineers too, with a focus on the time gap created by the mediation process and the recurrent solution to reduce latency below the thresholds of perception (McPherson et al. 2016). However, perceivable threshold of latency are irrelevant in the present discussion where the focus is on an onto-epistemological order.

[18] From this perspective, and in light of the present digital era, rhizome informed theories have simply come to acknowledging a status quo rather than presenting a political alternative (for context, see also footnote 8).

[19] Further details on the working mechanics of a reproducing piano can be found in Reblitz (1985).

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. (1970) 2020. *Aesthetic Theory*. University of Minnesota Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1977) 1986. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Verso.

Beghin, Yannick. 2024. 'Declassifying the Classics: Rhetoric, Technology, and Performance, 1750–1850.' Accessed 1 September 2024. https://orpheusinstituut.be/en/projects/declassifying-the-classics.

Bogost, Ian. 2012. *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing*. University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. (1980) 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press.

delle Zattere, Olivia. 2014. 'Orlan vs Nature.' Accessed 1 September 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cgYvHNSNQM.

Dixon, Steve. 2015. *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. MIT Press.

Eno, Brian. (1979) 2004. 'The Studio as Compositional Tool.' In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 127–130. Continuum.

Fazi, M. Beatrice. 2018. *Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience, and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Fazi, M. Beatrice. 2019. 'Digital Aesthetics: The Discrete and the Continuous.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 (1): 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418770243.

Feenberg, Andrew. 1999. *Questioning Technology*. Routledge.

Galloway, Alexander R. 2021. *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age*. Verso.

Galloway, Alexander R. 2022. 'Golden Age of Analog.' *Critical Inquiry* 48 (2): 211–232. https://doi.org/10.1086/717324.

Girardi, Lorenzo. 2017. Phenomenological Metaphysics as a Speculative Realism. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 48 (4): 336–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2017.1362778.

Glennie, Evelyn. 1993. 'Hearing Essay.' Accessed 28 May 2025. https://www.evelyn.co.uk/hearing-essay/.

Glennie, Evelyn. 2003. 'How to Truly Listen.' TED Talk, February. https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_how_to_truly_listen.

Goodman, Nelson. (1968) 1978. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed. Hackett.

Gupta, Rohan. 2009. *The Greg & Grainger Project*. Accessed 1 September 2024. http://www.griegpianoconcerto.com/grainger/biog.cfm.

Heidegger, Martin. (1954) 1996. "The Question Concerning Technology." Translated by William Lovitt. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 3–35. Harper & Row.

Ihde, Don. (1976) 2007a. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. 2nd ed. State University of New York Press. Originally published 1976.

Ihde, Don. 2007b. "Technologies—Musics—Embodiments." *Janus Head* 10 (1): 7–24. https://doi.org/10.5840/jh20071012.

Ihde, Don. 2009. *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking University Lectures*. SUNY Press.

Latour, Bruno. (1991) 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard University Press.

Lewis, David. 1971. 'Analog and Digital.' *Noûs* 5 (3): 321–327. https://doi.org/10.2307/2214671.

MacKay, Robin. 2018. *Speculative Aesthetics*. MIT Press.

Malafouris, Lambros. 2013. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. MIT Press.

Maley, Corey J. 2011. 'Analog and Digital, Continuous and Discrete.' *Philosophical Studies* 155 (1): 117–131. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9562-8.

Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Routledge.

Massumi, Brian. 2022. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. (1964) 1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of* Man. MIT Press.

McPherson, Andrew, Robert Jack, and Giulio Moro. 2016. 'Action-Sound Latency: Are Our Tools Fast Enough?' *Proceedings of the International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression*, 20–25. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3964611.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Routledge.

Paul, Christiane. (2003) 2015. *Digital Art*. 3rd ed. Thames & Hudson.

Reblitz, Arthur A. 1985. *Player Piano Servicing & Rebuilding: A Treatise on How Player Pianos Function, and How to Get Them Back into Top Playing Condition If They Don't Work*. Vestal Press.

Torre, Giuseppe. 2020. *An Ethico-Phenomenology of Digital Art Practices*. Routledge.

Torre, Giuseppe, and Pellizzer, Fabio Tommy. In-press. 'Selfhood and Artistic Individuality in "Bits" — What Gets Lost in the Translation from Analogue to Digital.' In *Finding our Place in the Digital World: Essays in Technology, Phenomenology, and the Environment*, edited by Ian Werkheiser and Michael Butler. Springer.

van den Berg, Jan Hendrik. (1955) 1987. 'The Human Body and the Significance of Human Movement.' In *Phenomenological Psychology: The Dutch School*, edited by Joseph J. Kockelmans, 55–77. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-3589-1_4.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Nick Montfort, eds. 2003. *The New Media Reader*. MIT Press.

Zahavi, Dan. 2016. 'The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism.' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24 (3): 289–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2016.1175101.

Zappa, Frank. 1986. *Jazz from Hell*. Barking Pumpkin (US)/EMI Records (UK).

Biography

Giuseppe Torre's work investigates the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of digital technologies. Using generative systems and live coding, he transforms algorithmic environments into spaces for critical reflection. Drawing on phenomenology and media theory, his practice embraces Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) as both a creative method and an ethical commitment, promoting transparency and collaboration.

As a performer, Torre has exhibited and performed internationally. His 2024 EP, *Incidental Effects*, reflects his focus on minimalism and real-time computation. His scholarly work, published by several presses, includes *An Ethico-Phenomenology of Digital Art Practices* (Routledge 2021), where he explores the ethical potentials and phenomenological limits of digital creativity.

Torre currently serves as an Associate Professor at the University of Limerick, Ireland.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ON SENSE-MAKING, GROOVE, AND CHOICE IN EXPERIMENTAL IMPROVISED MUSIC

JOSHUA BERGAMIN UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA
CHRISTOPHER A. WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS, GRAZ
AND GUSTAV MAHLER PRIVATE UNIVERSITY FOR MUSIC

> One piece of advice I find myself frequently giving to musicians in group improvising situations is not to focus on what they can do at any given moment… but instead to focus on what the music needs […]
>
> David Borgo (2014, 33)

> Interviewer: How do you know what the music needs?
> Robin Hayward (Tuba, Splitter Orchester): You ask it
>
> (Musical) Ethics Lab II, August 2022, Berlin

1. Introduction

Improvised music is often held up as an exemplar of artistic and personal freedom. A popular conception sees improvising musicians—especially towards the "freer" end of the spectrum—as having the space to do just about anything. But actual improvisations—conditioned by the actual people, spaces, tools, and scenes that perform them—are (also) processes of sense-making. As such, we will argue, they demonstrate in a very clear way how sense-making is enactive and participatory—how it involves a complex interplay between agents who are coupled together by bodily sensation and social norms with the other-than-human environment, which likewise acts on its enactors. Musicians bring music to life, but that music has a life of its own.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):170–192
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101483
ISSN 2057–7176

In this article, we will show how music can be understood as an emergent agent by examining the particular example of "groove" in experimental improvised music. We begin by looking at the phenomenon of groove more broadly, as an "organising principle" that emerges *between* musicians, and that structures them by both enabling and constraining creators' active choices. We then revise this picture by taking a cue from Charles Keil's concept of "participatory discrepancies", which emphasises the sense that these structures are themselves ongoing processes, and which include musical parameters beyond meter and groove. The sense of music as an unfolding, actively structuring participant in its own creation—we then argue—resonates with Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo's (2007) enactivist account of "participatory sense-making", with structures such as groove playing the role of an "emergent autonomous organisation" that participates alongside the musicians in the overall musical event. Our account therefore brings into question the role of *choice* in musical improvisation. In contrast to frequent accounts that stress individual freedom, we argue that the space of possible musical actions is constrained by the need to *make sense* in each particular, situated context. Furthermore, what musicians (and audiences) *hear*—and thus, what they *can* respond to—is both facilitated and constrained by emergent features (such as groove) that operate with a degree of autonomy from the will of any individual performer.

We illustrate this theoretical argument by exploring the emergence of groove in experimental improvised music, via a collaboration between the authors and the 21-piece improvising Splitter Orchester. Although groove is not a given in experimental improvisation, for that very reason its emergence, evolution, and propagation across the group show in very overt terms the sense of autonomy it has over and above its players. We conclude with the suggestion that these features are present, if less visible, in other forms of music, too.

2. The Act of Musicking

As musicologists Christopher Small (1998), Nicholas Cook (2013; 2017), and others have noted, music is something we *do*. While this may seem obvious to musicians, it is only relatively recently that philosophers and music scholars have approached music as an enacted process, rather than something like an object. Our everyday way of talking about musical 'works'—songs or symphonies—can obscure the fact that such works are unfolding and temporal. Music only exists *as* music in the moments when it is enacted by musicians and/or interpreted by audiences.

On the philosophical side, scholars such as Høffding and Schiavio (2021) and Solli and Netland (2021) have discussed how various elements of musical performance should be seen as explorative and enacted skills. Even performing a well-practiced score—the archetypical "work"—requires ongoing sensitivity and situational responsiveness as the music is brought to life anew each time. From another angle Krueger (2009, 2011) has emphasised how listening to music is itself an active and skilled process, one that fuses the extended sequence of experienced sounds into a cohesive whole.

To question the way we think about enacting music is thus also to raise questions about musical agency. If musicking is an active process, then the various, inextricable elements of that process—

not just musicians, but also instruments, spaces etc.—all contribute to how that music takes shape, in ways that aren't reducible to the intellectual decisions of any individual agent (Clarke, Doffman, and Lim 2013; Cobussen 2017; Wheeler 2018). To the contrary, many musicians often report experiencing the music—the unfolding sonic situation—as having a sense of agency in and of itself, that it "wants" to be a certain way (Borgo 2014; Schuiling 2022; Bergamin forthcoming).[1]

In what follows, we explore musical agency by bringing theory into direct dialogue with musical practice. As diverse approaches to a shared concern, philosophy and music complement each other both by making phenomena more visible (or rather, audible), and by generating new questions from practice. In particular, we can see and interrogate the way that music is not only the unfolding of a process, but itself a participant in the action.

We will focus on the musical phenomenon of groove, not only because it exemplifies significant features of music's autonomy, nor simply because it has been the topic of growing interdisciplinary research, but also because everyone can feel it. Groove, we will argue, is an example of an "organising principle" that serves both to enable and constrain the space of musical action by structuring which musical possibilities "make sense" in the moment of enaction. Whereas much literature on groove (Madison 2006; Witek et al. 2014) focuses on the audience's experience, and Krueger (2009; 2011), Roholt (2014), and Witek (2017) have emphasised the active, bodily elements of *listening* to music, our focus here is on performers—who are of course listeners as well—and how they participate together with the music they produce. Nevertheless, we should not forget that listening is an active form of participatory experience as well, although we cannot dwell on it here.

Of course, not all music involves groove, and many other musical features could play the role of "organising principle", even simultaneously. For example, drones, as we shall see, frequently arise in experimental forms of improvisation for their ability to unite vastly different sounds into a common musical action. But since rhythmic grooves appear across a wide variety of genres and practices, we focus on groove here in order to facilitate comparison across other styles discussed in the literature. Many of the arguments we make about groove could also apply to other musical parameters and phenomena, although the extent of such overlap will have to remain a question for future research.

3. What is groove?

3.1 The grid

Groove is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down, both analytically and practically for players. The most common, and perhaps least helpful, definition is that groove is a *feeling*. This vague term has itself been used in multiple senses, either to describe the feeling *of* the music (it feels "laid back" or "upbeat") or to describe a feeling engendered *by* the music ("groove is a feature of music that makes you want to move" [Janata, Tomic, and Haberman 2012, 57]). Among music scholars, there is more agreement that groove involves subtle musical nuances (Roholt 2014), "microtimings"

(Iyer 2002), or "discrepancies" (Keil 1987), wherein musical actions create particular "feels" by deviating from a metrical norm.

Understood in this way, groovy music—such as in jazz, rock, or hip-hop—is seen to be structured by something outside of and between the performers—a metric "organising principle", or what is frequently described by musicians as "the grid". The grid structures where musicians can "place" sounds; in the simplest terms, those temporal spaces represented in a score as quarter or eighth-notes. Of course, what makes groove *groovy* (and thus difficult to represent) are the discrepancies from such a grid. Laid-back strikes land slightly "off" the grid lines, ghost notes "skip" over them. Yet in doing so, such discrepancies nevertheless *imply* the grid—it is what they are discrepant *from*. That is, our shared intuition of an "invisible" grid is what allows us to make sense of the music *as* groovy.

Depending on both the individual player and the genre, musicians have the freedom to be more or less discrepant. As a consequence, a groove may feel relatively "laid-back", "edgy", "locked-in", or even fall "out of time". A groove may even shift between such states in a single performance (Butterfield 2010, 171–73). Nevertheless, the "grid" also plays a constraining role on what makes musical "sense", for at a more extreme states of discrepancy, the groove falls apart.

As an "organising principle", the "grid" is not something that exists purely between musicians, but also unites them with their audience. Indeed, the audience's moving bodies (a common signifier of groove [Witek et al. 2014]) demonstrate that they, too, are attuned to the same "grid" as the musicians. As Roholt (2014, 108) argues, a listener's moving body is not *caused by* the rhythm, but is a mode of coming to know it, to "tune into" it. In this sense, the grid facilitates the audience's movements, while also constraining what "makes sense". The charged atmosphere of a concert stems from the clear, unspoken understanding that everyone in the room is attuned to the same event.[2]

Roholt (2014, 86–7) also suggests that pulses—and by extension, grids—can be "implicit" without actually being played. And he later (111–2) suggests that discrepancies (or "nuances") are felt primarily as a "disequilibrium", or a tension between what is expected (the pulse) and what is experienced (the discrepant beat). We could say, therefore, that this tension gives a sense of the music or grid "pushing back"—asserting its independence from the player's deliberate action, and emphasising the sense in which the invisible grid structures the perception and actions of all the players and listeners.

Hagberg (2016, 486–7) has noted the important, structuring role of implicit or "imaginary" music running underneath an improvisation. Discussing a 1961 performance by a John Coltrane trio, he describes the saxophone solo as a commentary on "an unheard piece on the other side of the sound", and the effect of the drummer's elision of a "momentarily unheard but still sensed" rhythm—what we have been calling the "grid". But it's important to stress that we use "grid" here as a shorthand; its presence is not dependent on musicians and audiences explicitly counting or reacting to *every* metrical beat. Indeed, in our primary experience, grids—especially in musical styles and cultures we are familiar with—are perceived pre-reflectively as what Maurice Merleau-

Ponty ([1942] 1983, 168) described as attractive or repulsive "forces", analogous to the affordances available to a football player moving across the field, whose opportunities and hindrances are constituted by the normative situation of the game. It is something we navigate by *inhabiting*, taking cues from the external world rather than via internalised, deliberative decision-making.

In just the same way, Roholt (2014, 108, 112) argues that our "grasp" of a groove involves using our body to find what Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012, 278–79) called an "optimal grip" on the groove and the sense in which it dances around the grid, offering different possibilities while curtailing others. The discrepancies between the groove and the grid may make it difficult to latch onto aurally, but by moving with it, the musician enters a dynamic relationship with the music:

> once the groove is constituted, the [musician's] task becomes easier; like driving a car in snow-grooves, he feels that there is some external force—in the music—guiding his movements and limbs. It is in this feeling of being guided that he feels as though he has been pulled into a musical notch. And the consequence of the musical notch is the easing of his task. (Roholt 2014, 112)

"The grid", then, describes a common centre of the music that unites its performers. The grid is present in a "virtual" sense. It is part of the music and plays a structural role even if it is never sounded in an actual sense. Its very intuitiveness and invisibility are what make it an "organising principle"—a clear exemplar of what we will explore below as an "emergent autonomous organisation"—with a certain independence from any of its individual performers. Even if the music stops altogether, there is a sense that the rhythm is still somehow "there", waiting to be picked up again (an effect frequently exploited by DJs, who use gaps in the rhythm to create tension on the dance floor).

For live musicians, there is a clear sense that the rhythm is "going somewhere", and that it "wants" to be a certain way. (This is not always a positive feeling; sometimes the only place the groove goes is in circles, and most improvisors can recall moments of getting "stuck" in a piece of music—of having their choices restrained to the point where they can come up with nothing that would make musical sense.)

Nevertheless, it is equally important to stress that the "grid" is not fixed and "in control" over-and-above the performers. As we will argue below, it represents one of a number of *participants* in a dynamic process that *influences* and is influenced *by* other agents.

3.2 Participatory Discrepancies

We have so far been discussing grooves and "grids" in purely metrical terms. This conception resonates with ethnomusicologist Charles Keil's account of groove as "participatory discrepancies" (1966, 1987, 1995).[3] Though coined in his article "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music" (1987), the concept first appears in his critique (1966) of musicologist Leonard Meyer's emphasis on syntax and macrostructure (Meyer 1956). Simplistically put, Keil argues that groove, or "vital drive" (1966, 340–41), plays a central role in musical process in the majority of the world's traditions, and that its subtle and contingent dynamics play as important a role as the macro-

syntactical features that had been the main focus of Meyer, and indeed most musicology, at that time.

The term "participatory discrepancy" describes the sense of tension between an expectation and an experience that creates the unique *feel* we experience as groove. Keil initially focuses on aspects of expressive microtiming in jazz, especially the push-and-pull between a bassist's and a drummer's attacks "ahead of" or "behind" the beat, and the soloist's movement around this vector (1966). For Keil, such rhythmic tension is the elusive heart of swing, the "engendered feeling" (338) that invites listeners to move and so utterly escapes Meyer's analytical orientation toward the "unity of form and expression" traceable in written scores (338–339).

However, in his second article on participatory discrepancies (1987) Keil develops his account beyond the metric/rhythmic qualities of the music, generalising discrepant tension to include timbral and tonal qualities, among other parameters. His claim for the importance of performers' "semiconscious or unconscious slightly out of syncnesses" (275), previously focused on rhythm, becomes louder, broader, and more prescriptive: "Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune'" (275).

That is to say, Keil observes that what captivates us in music is the sense of tension it creates as it moves towards and away from a precision never fully achieved. For example, Keil applies the discrepancy concept to "the blended harmonics of two trumpets" (278) in a typical Chicago polka band. In this style, the trumpet section generally plays melodies in unison or tightly-voiced consonant harmonies in rhythmic unison, but whose tuning remains discreetly "off". This creates subtle acoustical "beating" patterns, or overtone interferences that are especially audible in a pair of like instruments. If only one trumpet were to play, any acoustical beating with timbrally-unlike instruments, such as clarinet or accordion, would be significantly less obvious. If three or more trumpets were to play, the complex array of beating patterns would make it difficult to identify interferences as discrepancies, and instead create a rich group sonority. But precisely the *pair* of trumpets, whose volume and colour stand out from the polka instrumentation, marks the style through its refined "out-of-tune-ness".

Keil's account of participatory discrepancies differs from the "grid" discussed above in his emphasis on the discrepancies between *performers*, rather than from some objective "mean". For Keil, centring the "grid" as a reference point would suggest a musical work that exists somehow independently of its creating-performers—precisely the kind of fixed "musical object" that he disavows in favour of a "process"-centred view.

Keil (1987) offers synonyms for participatory discrepancies—including "creative tensions" and "relaxed dynamisms" (275)—and therefore plants the seeds for expanding the concept from musical micro-features to a performance's relational phenomena. To the *rhythmic* category of participatory discrepancies he adds *textural* elements (timbre, sound, and tonal qualities) and *compositional voice* ("as arranged by") (275). For example, he treats as analogous acoustic phenomena (the "bright" and "happy" quality of two-trumpet lineups in polka bands described

above), style (the wild glissandi of Goral singing), and distributed creativity ("the sound of groups a, b, and c" in jazz),[4] insofar as each of these examples displays a form of discrepancy (278).

What links these diverse phenomena as *discrepancies* is the sense in which their enactment implies something that they are *not*, and that this is precisely what makes them recognisable as what they *are*. The concept of participatory discrepancies suggests that what is captivating in music lies not just in particular sounds but their *interaction*—and not just between the sound-producers themselves, but with the very sounds that emerge *between* them. But while Keil argued adamantly against the idea of a musical object that the concept of "grid" seems to invoke, the very idea of "discrepancy" nevertheless implies something "unheard" that the musical actions are discrepant *from*—something like a "centre of gravity" in physics which does not strictly-speaking exist, yet encapsulates very real effects.

In any case, Keil's emphasis on relationality highlights that whatever "grid"-like structures may lie between the musicians, they are not fixed "objects". Rather, they are emergent, temporal, relational phenomena, created by musicians' shared actions, even as those very actions respond to such phenomena "as if" it were independent. To get a better handle on how such an emergent "between" could exert real effects on musical agents, we will in the next section introduce the enactivist concept of "participatory sense-making".

4. Participatory Sense-Making

The idea that the transient, intangible event of music is not merely a *product* of musicians, but acts *on* them with a form of agency may at first glance appear counter-intuitive. But our discussion of the "grid" above gives some clue about how we might think about this. Even while what makes groove *groovy* is its discrepancy from the (implied but invisible) grid—thus emphasising the musicians' subtle responsive agency—it nevertheless simultaneously *constrains* what they can do. There is only so far a beat can be discrepant and still *make sense as a beat* in the context of the music.

This account aligns with the concept of "participatory sense-making", as articulated by the enactivist philosophers De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007). Participatory sense-making describes how cognition comprises not only the action of an individual agent in its environment (the standard enactivist position), but also the *inter*-action of two (or more) agents around a shared object of concern. Since many cognitive actions involve multiple agents, De Jaegher and Di Paolo argue for understanding them as elements of a single dynamic system, who "couple" together as they make sense of an evolving situation in co-ordinated action[5] A simple example of such cognitive "coupling" is two strangers trying to pass one another on a busy street. Their brief interaction involves a range of gestures—including body position, eye movements, and so forth—that enable (or hinder) the pair in getting around one another.

When all is going well, such an interaction is so brief and effortless that neither agent really pays much attention to the other. But this by no means suggests that they are not participating with

one another—on the contrary, it shows just how sensitively each inhabits the shared physical and social environment of the bustling city sidewalk. In such a situation, we co-ordinate our body both with cues from the other (head and eye movements, for example) as well as the physical environment (fixed obstacles, gaps, and so forth). Yet in spite of ourselves, things sometimes go awry. Perhaps we misread the other, and instead of stepping around them, we turn the same way and "mirror" them. De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007, 493) note that this position makes it more likely we will both turn and mirror the other *again*—that is, our normal way of interacting now works against us "in spite of, or rather because of, [our] efforts to break from this situation." The relational dynamics of the participants have formed an interaction ("mirroring") that functions autonomously of the beliefs and desires of the individuals involved, locking us into an awkward dance.

From this simple example, we can expand the participatory sense-making model to other forms of shared activity, which may be more or less extended over time—from a moment of smalltalk to a passionate debate—and more or less planned out—from waltzing in a ballroom to skanking in a dancehall. Of central importance to the concept of participatory sense-making is that the merging of agency during "coupling" involves not just the two participants and their environment, but the shared *interaction* in *between* them—i.e., the conversation or the dance.

De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007, 493) describe the shared "in-between" phenomenon as an "emergent autonomous organisation" that participates in the action as something like an object, or even agent, in its own right. The "something like" is important, because there is no suggestion that the in-between is independently "conscious" in the ordinary sense, but rather emphasises how cognitive processes "ain't (all) in the head" (as Clark and Chalmers [1998, 8], famously put it). Cognition stems from action, and extends not only through the objects with which we interact, but also further into the dynamic spaces *between* us as well—which in turn *act on* us.

This conception describes the way that what is "between", by offering certain affordances, always constrains others. In a conversation, for example, I can't say two things at the same time.[6] I make a choice, but what I say will then influence how you respond, and (to a degree) limit the kind of things that you can say that will "make sense" in reply—which will of course then have the same effect on me. The conversation therefore takes "a life of its own" (Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher 2018, 65–66; see also Goffman 1967, 113). It is a cumulative event that is more than the sum of its parts, and many of the best conversations end up far away from where either partner anticipated.

With Andrea Schiavio, De Jaegher has gone on to apply this thought directly to music, arguing that thinking of music as dynamic, participatory sense-making reveals

> the "musical object" not as a fixed and wholly pre-given structure, but rather as an emergent phenomenon that develops through shared active involvement in the musical event; the musical object is, by this light, an ongoing open structure that *shapes and is shaped by* the sensemakers *in a circular fashion*. (Schiavio and De Jaegher 2017, 34 [our emphasis])

"Musical object" here might most naturally be read as a finished "work" like a classical sonata or a pop song. As we saw above, the terms "work" and "object" tend to lead us toward thinking of music

in terms of a "product" of the musicians even as it guides them towards a more or less precise realisation. But as Benson (2003) and Cook (2013) point out, even a classical score always involves some degree of performer choice, as they interpret the score while adjusting to their co-performers. Likewise, the phenomenon of groove that we have been exploring—with its ongoing sense of participatory tension—shows how "object" here might better be phrased as "process" or "event" (McAuliffe 2022).

As an unfolding event, all music involves performer decisions or negotiation around particular parameters, what Bergamin (forthcoming) calls *provisos*, which act as (fluid) structures. The metrical "grid", as described above, offers an illustration of such a *proviso*, one that "shapes and is shaped by" the musical sense-makers. A similar role can be attributed to the key in Dixieland jazz or the *raag* in classical Hindustani improvisations, which facilitate the practice by enabling certain musical decisions and constraining others. In this context, Keil's insight, via his expanded concept of the participatory discrepancy, is to suggest that desired musical qualities arise in the spaces where musicians' decisions "rub up" against these implied (and otherwise invisible) *provisos*.

Pace Keil, this conception might nevertheless seem to continue to objectify such structures, in contrast to the "process" view he recommends. Yet, as Schuiling (2022, 329) notes, that "process" nevertheless shows up to musicians in a "thing"-like way. McAuliffe (2022) also notes that improvisors don't direct their attention explicitly to each others' actions so much as to the emergent music *between* them. He circumvents the object/process binary by arguing that both the music and performers are constituted by the musical *event*, "where the emergent work and the players comprise a single unity" (6). As in a conversation, the interaction creates a space in which subject(s) and work shape each other.

Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher (2018) suggest that our bias of looking at emergent, participatory phenomena like music and language in objectified terms can be overcome by considering them *dialectically* (109). Our very method of analysing a piece of music, or a linguistic interaction, creates an illusion that we are dealing with a *thing* rather than a *process*. This dialectic process is often hidden to us by its everyday familiarity. We converse in our mother tongues, or play music in familiar styles, without much attention to how the interaction itself guides the decisions we make as we participate. As Bergamin (forthcoming, 11–18) notes, such decisions frequently aren't felt *as* decisions in the flow of improvised performance. Rather, the actions that show up as *possible* for a musician are *both* enabled and constrained by what he calls *provisos*. That is, the situated context of the performance (in terms of genre, materials, and constellation of performers with specific abilities and histories) will afford a much more limited range of choices that "make sense" than the "freedom" popularly associated with improvisation would suggest (see also Peters 2012, 5–6). Furthermore, musical *provisos* are *dynamic*—as in a conversation, each musical action alters the situation, referring to what came before and creating a pathway for what comes next. Groove offers a very clear example of such a dynamic *proviso*.

In the following section, we explore "groove" as an emergent musical phenomenon "in the wild", as it manifests in experimental improvised music, in order to more clearly see how it co-emerges

with the musical event. By approaching musical co-creation without pre-given parameters like metre or tonal key, improvisors raise interesting questions about *how* improvised musical decisions are made, and make more visible the act of musical sense-making as an unfolding negotiation between musicians and the event.

5. (Non-)groove in experimental improvised music

We have already seen how different musical styles and practices tolerate different degrees of discrepancy with regards to what makes musical sense. Such differences of degree can even occur within the same musical event. In a jazz trio observed by Doffman (2009), the rhythm section "locked" into a consistent groove (where the drum attack tended to anticipate the bass), while the guitarist experienced her solo as moving across that groove as a "wave" (142). Her report of "moving apart and together" with her bandmates was echoed in Doffman's musical analysis, which showed a fluid discrepancy in her relation to her bandmates.

Such fluidity, common to more contemporary forms of jazz and experimental musics, reveals additional layers of dynamism, emphasising that a groove is never simply a secondary grid "offset" by some fixed/regular discrepancy. Both groove and grid exist relationally, and the grid implied by "looser" grooves might have a "waviness" whose regularity is not overtly metronomic. Grooves and grids furthermore need not be stable, and some musics provide more space for different possible relationships to groove, including avoiding it altogether.

In experimental improvised music (EIM), for example, groove's role tends to be optional and/or highly contingent. EIM is not a tradition with codified rhythmic feels to the degree that, say, polka (see Keil 1987) or soul and funk (see Danielsen 2006) are. Rather, it is an aesthetically and geographically broad network of practices, some of which embrace groove sometimes, and others not. This can be traced in part to the radically diverse backgrounds of musicians, which include everything from jazz and sound art to DJ culture and Western and non-Western classical musics (see Fermont and Della Faille 2016; Lewis 1996, 112–13)—all of which themselves have different relationships to groove. The wide bandwidth of performer choice—with regard to how, what, and when to play in concrete performances as well as to longer-term questions of materials, tools, and partners—is another possible contributing factor to different approaches to groove across EIM communities.

In EIM, the entire performance is an ongoing negotiation. Often no musician is a clear leader, and where leader-follower relationships do emerge, they are chosen and reasserted with each new musical decision—both leader and follower usually have the possibility of "opting out" at any moment. This is not to say that musicians never (consciously or unconsciously) try to dominate or assert their will, but rather to emphasise that such assertions take place in a dynamic context, and that the final result depends on the combined choices of the entire ensemble.[7]

This sense of negotiation resists the myth that EIM is *totally* free. Much like in a conversation—where one is always technically free to change the subject, or even not to respond at all—there are

multiple but ultimately a finite number of things one can say that will make sense in a given context. In EIM, the bandwidth of choice may be broader than in more traditionally-structured improvisations, but constraints are nevertheless imposed by the musicians' materials, skills, and the norms of their scene(s). Where EIM differs, perhaps, is in the degree to which the norms *themselves* are often up for negotiation during the performance. Whether or not a piece "works" will depend on all of these factors, and it is not uncommon for a piece to "work" or "make sense" to one performer/listener and not to another, or vice versa.[8]

How, then, might groove appear in EIM? Indeed, there are as many answers to this question as there are performances, or even moments within performances. To take one example, pianist and bandleader Cecil Taylor, recognised as one of the pioneers of free jazz, largely "dispensed with bars, time signatures" after the mid-1960s (Felver 2005, 31:38). In ensemble recordings such as *Conquistador!* (1968), one can hear "metastable" grooves,[9] or dynamic rhythmic textures on the edge of groove within a range of (ir)regularity. Here, individual players seem to play neither a steady pulse nor a steady meter. Nevertheless, the band forms a rhythmically tight unit through constant motivic interaction and sectional changes of tempo and density. Time feels are often, though not always, anchored in the driving energy of the bass and drums and Taylor's non-repetitive syncopations. Players also approach a shared pulse during occasional appearances of precomposed material. Recalling the "moving apart and together" reported by Doffman (2009) above, Ekkehard Jost describes these rhythmic phenomena as

> chains of impulses whose links, though they may be of irregular length, do suggest a dynamic order. That order can perhaps best be visualized if we compare the beat of traditional jazz to walking, or to the even strides of a long-distance runner; while the rhythm of the Cecil Taylor group is like the alternating strides and leaps of a hurdler, with the hurdles places at unequal intervals. (Jost 1994, 72)

Guitarist Derek Bailey and Butoh dancer Min Tanaka illustrate a different approach in *Mountain Stage* (Bailey and Tanaka 1993), a live outdoor performance in which they tend even further away from conventional groove. Silence and stillness play a significant role; there is no "rhythm section" other than masses of insects in the background. Rhythmic interaction revolves largely around non-repetitive movement in loose counterpoint. Bailey may punctuate Tanaka's irregular phrases; Tanaka may plant slower, lyrical material in Bailey's metastable "beds". However, a number of extended moments with a strong shared, regular pulse do emerge.[10] These often begin with an offer: out of irregular textures, one performer repeats a figure, and the other adapts. These momentary grooves ebb, flow, and disappear as unpredictably as they arise. They are striking not only in their contrast to the predominantly non-groovy material in the rest of the performance, but also in their suggestion of constant rhythmic synchrony below the seemingly disjointed surface.

Groove in EIM can also occur without the explicit participation of an entire group. This is particularly true of larger ensembles; greater numbers of players and the physical distance between them afford relative independence of sub-groupings and textural layers. In the next section, for example, we analyse the development of a groove within a performance by the Splitter Orchester, a Berlin-based 21-piece contemporary improvising ensemble.[11] In the video excerpt that we present, we

will hear an emergent groove propagate across various individual musicians even as other co-performers refrain from directly engaging with it, continuing instead to contribute different layers of musical material. However, we shall note how the groove nevertheless structures how we *hear* the performance even of those musicians who do not directly participate, thereby emphasising the autonomy of groove both in its independence from individual performers and in its effects on listeners.

In all of these examples groove remains a contingent possibility, whose terms, duration, dynamics, and feel are not given *a priori*, but rather cohere through participation. In contrast to many other improvised (and non-improvised) musics, groove in experimental improvised music can be initiated by any participant or participants, at indeterminate moments, rather than being counted off by a band leader, or given by a stylistic convention or work.

6. Exploring Emergence through Artistic Research

In what follows, we present an example of groove as an "organising principle" as it emerged during a performance by the Splitter Orchester. The recording was made during a public concert as part of *(Musical) Ethics Lab 2*—the second of seven artistic research encounters exploring ethical questions in and around musical practice. The Lab format comprised a weeklong workshop followed by public presentations and discussions.

The workshop centred on a series of *interventions*: concepts, exercises, scores, and kits for pieces that served to focus attention on particular musico-ethical themes. These themes included musicians' divergent habits and resources, problems of listening across physical distance, and the role of judgement in musicians' entrances and exits of an ongoing piece (Williams 2022; forthcoming). Discussion around interventions among musicians and with researchers during rehearsals both steered the evolution of the workshop and provided a focus of participant observation.

Throughout the week, Bergamin conducted one-on-one "phenomenological interviews" with most ensemble members (see Bergamin forthcoming). These comprised in-depth, semi-structured conversations that worked with musicians to articulate their *experience* of improvising, aiming towards rich descriptions of the shifting modes of attention and agency, and subtle cues which guide a musician's performance (see also Høffding and Martiny 2016; Høffding and Snekkestad 2021). Descriptions were later transcribed, phenomenologically analysed, and tagged by theme. "Groove" was a recurring theme across interviews, as well as across Labs. These interviews have thus informed our discussion here, even though—beyond occasional quotes—we have not drawn on them explicitly in this article.[12]

This interdisciplinary approach creates a virtuous circle between theory and practice, allowing topics that arise in the practice to inform the theory, which can then be fed back into practice through discussions and musical interventions. Experimental improvised music is well suited to this form of artistic research, as it typically presupposes a minimum of pre-given parameters

(*provisos*) in comparison to other improvising styles. For example, a performer is not expected to adhere to a specific *tal*, as in North Indian improvisations, or to respect a traditional bowing technique, as a Scottish folk fiddler might.

Of course, as Currie (2016) notes, EIM scenes are constituted by their own (often tacit) expectations. So-called "non-idiomatic" styles have a tendency to develop idioms of their own, often defined more by an active *refusal* of the structural *provisos* common to other improvising idioms, than by a freedom to do "anything. [13] Furthermore, Banerji (2021) notes that a tendency to treat "transatlantic" (Currie 2016) or "eurological" (Lewis 1996) improvisation as somehow capturing the "essence" of improvisation more broadly carries problematic overtones, echoing a Eurocentrism that sees itself as the "default" against which other cultural practices are measured. For this reason, we stress that we are working with *experimental* improvised music—a distinct and contingent practice—rather than "improvised music" writ large.

All the same, in the Lab context, the sense in which a minimum of *provisos* are presumed in this practice means that the structures of any particular piece are always in question, and can be focused on as and when they arise. In this sense, the "experimental" in experimental improvised music approaches its scientific (*geisteswissenschaftlich*) sense, since the active interrogation of musical parameters and materials has the advantage of making emergent structures—precisely because they are contingent—more visible when they *do* emerge.

As mentioned above, in the case of the Splitter Orchester, groove is not an expectation (and indeed, in the band's history—as in the so-called "Berlin reductionist" scene from which they arose—it was, if not explicitly forbidden, at least tacitly discouraged [Blažanović 2011]). Yet Splitter includes members who have an active interest in rhythm and grooves, and at the time of the Labs the band was more open to incorporating groove into its improvisations. Thus, when grooves *did* arise, they retained an open and contingent quality that we argue more explicitly underlines the autonomous sense of "agency" that groove brings to *all* improvised styles.

6.1 Analysis: Splitter

Take for example Figure 1, which is an excerpt from Splitter's public concert at the end of *(Musical) Ethics Lab 2*. The piece was a "free" improvisation in the sense that the only explicitly pre-agreed parameter was that the ensemble would play a single, continuous piece for the duration of the set (about 30–40 minutes), although the music that resulted was of course influenced by the interventions, discussions, and experiences of the preceding week.

Figure 1: Splitter Orchester, Musical Ethics Lab 2 *(excerpt).* https://vimeo.com/1038525438

At the beginning of the clip, we notice the first hints of a groove when keyboardist Magda Mayas introduces a repeated low C# in her left hand and an "upbeat" chord in her right hand within a steady tempo. In this otherwise non-groovy context, one can hear the pattern as an offer, comparable to groovy moments in *Mountain Stage*; other musicians may or may not join in. A sense of a grid emerges, a pulse with a therefore latent potential for groove, even if there is none there yet. The fact that the offer is not immediately accepted by the whole band reveals participatory discrepancies at the level of form. This "compositional discrepancy", so to speak, is a widespread, perhaps inherent, feature of EIM. If performers decide during performance when to play, form is bound to be a consequence of discrepant values, perceptions, and expectations (Canonne and Garnier 2015). Groups with long collective performance histories may, through habit or deliberate training, sharpen a shared sense of when sectional changes (could or should) occur and thus react more quickly to such offers. Nonetheless, the possibility of a groove here is held in suspense for at least 20 seconds before any musicians accept.

At 0:40, drummer Steve Heather starts playing "around" Mayas' regular pulse. On their own, Heather's figures are not exactly groovy—they are discrepant from the pulse, or "out of time", in a way that pianist Thelonious Monk's right hand often is from his left (see Iyer 2002, 407–9). On closer

inspection, Mayas' initial offer is also less regular than it may have first appeared. Though her tempo and pulse are steady, the metrical grouping of alternating C#s and dyads is ambiguous; there doesn't seem to be any clear "one"-beat. Her use of the volume pedal makes the stream continuously louder or softer, swelling over shorter and longer phases. Other musicians are thus likely to feel different emphases in this emerging groove, rather than a common downbeat; Mayas' approach to dynamics invites participatory discrepancies at the level of metre.

And yet, Heather and Mayas come to make rhythmic sense. The "grid" here is more of a "wave", a metastability. Mayas' *ostinato* provides the impulse, but over time, she seems neither to play to the others, nor they to her—rather, the duo plays to something in between their individual contributions. This "emergent autonomous organisation" is clearly perceivable beyond the two participants. The trombonist in the middle of the stage, Matthias Müller, begins to bob his head in time as the groove coalesces, although he does not participate in it through sound.

Cellist Anthea Caddy enters at 0:55. Percussive flurries with the wood of her bow on the body of her instrument are timbrally and spatially proximate to Heather's rimshots, accenting the rhythmic coupling of Heather to Mayas. Despite being even further "out of time" with respect to Mayas' pulse than Heather, Caddy consolidates the groovy moment, ipso facto expanding the duo to a trio. The groove continues when Mayas temporarily reduces her volume below the threshold of audibility and only the percussive clatter of Heather and Caddy remains. That is, the "wavy grid" persists even as nobody plays directly "on" it. In fact, it holds the trio together exactly *because* no single musician is "on" it. Like a "centre of gravity", it is both imaginary yet real in its effects. It is not simply implied by the decisions of the three individuals, but structures and constrains them as well, as something they *feel* together and maintain a connection to in its ongoing production.

At the same, a structurally similar but non-groovy centre of gravity gathers musicians outside the grooving trio of Magdas, Heather, and Caddy. The dominant texture elsewhere in the band—present from the beginning of the excerpt—consists of high-pitched sustained tones including bowed cymbals, electronics, pinched trumpet notes, violin, clarinet, and stroked Tibetan singing bowls. This drone cluster constitutes its own kind of parallel organising principle within the group. Individuals enter and leave the drone, but the sustained texture persists; nearly all the musicians playing at any given moment in this excerpt belong to one centre of gravity or the other.

After Caddy enters, Heather introduces occasional irregular cymbal and snare drum accents; Mayas begins to put more weight on the dyad in her right hand, blurring its previous "upbeat" quality with respect to the now quieter low C#s in her left. Occasional sharp accents on the dyad echo Heather's snare hits; as they pop out of the texture, these gestures add an additional layer of complexity to the groove. As this complexity and textural density increase, the pulse loses force and the band gets louder. When Mayas fades out around 2:40, the groove appears to have run its course.

Or does it? At 3:05, Müller sounds his trombone after minutes of silent kinetic complicity. The tempo of his repeated growling gesture approximates that of the trio groove, suggesting a continuation. This moment is noteworthy for how it encapsulates the systemic coupling of the

musicians and the groove—and thus the sense-making process they comprise. On the one hand, Müller offers to extend the groove into a new section, as Mayas did at the beginning of the clip. The potential is there for anyone in the band to join Müller in a direct continuation of the earlier pulsing movement. Caddy appears to take up the offer, briefly joining with semi-regular left-hand pizzicato punctuations on low open cello strings. The pulse, almost inaudible, never clearly ceases. On the other hand, the groove *itself* passes from the trio to Müller and then back to Caddy over time and space; it persists as an entity over and above the actions of the individuals participating within it. This moment recalls the persistence of the earlier groove between Heather and Caddy during Mayas' momentary disappearances through the use of her volume pedal.

Furthermore, it highlights the role of another agent in this emergent mesh of participatory discrepancies: the listener(s). As we listen to this music evolve over three minutes, we hear something rather different from outside the ensemble than the musicians did on stage. This is partly a question of acoustic perspective. Musicians work with what is audible from their unique position in an evolving sound mass at any given moment, whereas audiences have an overview made possible by concert hall architecture and audio postproduction. But it is also a question of structural affordances. When a groove appears—even among a relatively small subsection of musicians (three to four in an ensemble of twenty-one)—it draws us in. We are predisposed to listen in the groove,[14] to accept it with our entire bodies as an organising principle for the rest of the mostly non-groovy musical activity. Meelberg (2011) has even gone so far as to characterise groove as "a sonic intrusion that makes use of the vulnerability of the listeners' and performers' bodies". In other words, the groove acts on us, too, suggesting certain possibilities and constraining others.

That is to say, the dynamic sense-making situation does not merely gather together the musicians with the music, but also the audience. The music makes claims on its hearers; certain features, like a pulse or groove call attention to themselves and structure the experience.[15] But audiences—as participatory sense-makers too—are not merely passive experiencers. Active listening may take many forms, depending on the context of the performance—from aurally exploring the subtleties of the music (as in most classical or EIM contexts), to cheering the musicians on (as in a jazz or blues club), to singing or dancing along (as at a rock concert or an electronic dance music festival). In every case, the audience are themselves drawn integrally into the dynamic musical event, with a freedom to respond that is nevertheless constrained by the ways that *make sense* within the musical context and norms of the "scene".[16] Certain features of the music will "pop out" as more salient to the listener, and while many of these will depend on the listener's own prior experience and training, others—such as Splitter's groove—assert themselves more prominently. While the listener can focus their attention to greater or lesser degrees, they cannot *choose* what they hear. In group improvisation, the performers, too, hear the music and its possibilities in the light of their experience, and can only choose *how* they respond, calling dialectically on their co-performers to respond again.

Where scholars of improvisation have frequently stressed the space it gives to individual freedom (Watson 2004; Corbett 2016; see also Banerji 2018), our account brings into question the role of

performer *choice*, amid larger questions of freedom, agency, and decision-making. An enactive understanding pushes beyond questions of a performer's "will," into a richer account of how the space of possible musical actions is always constrained by its situated context, as well as how—rather than simply "restricting" freedom—such constraints are the generative pre-condition of musicking *per se*. Generative constraints include what Bergamin (forthcoming), cited above, calls *provisos*. For example, material provisos (e.g., the shape of an instrument) enable a finite range of sounds while facilitating particular movements and musical gestures; musical provisos (e.g., musical keys or time signatures) offer normative limits for which sounds can be played and when. In both cases, provisos function both as constraints on performer choice while at the same time as the enabling condition for participating in a particular style or musical culture.

But we also saw that provisos are dynamic, and in improvisation, the need to make sense *of* and *with* the music becomes a higher order constraint. In "freer" styles—where norms around instrumental technique and musical parameters are more relaxed or even actively challenged—the role of interpersonal sense-making becomes even more pronounced. Processes of active sense-making take place not just between musicians—who respond to one another—but with audiences as well, whose appreciation comes through sensitivity to the sonic and social dynamics of the performance. "Success" in improvisation is not a case of conforming accurately to a score, but in being *understood* in a hermeneutic sense (McAuliffe 2023)—that is, in entering together with one's co-performers/listeners into a shared field of meaning.

Gary Peters (2012) even claims that experimental improvisation, perhaps counter-intuitively, is rarely *truly* surprising, since to act within a particular social milieu is in a sense to accept the implicit boundaries that structure and communicate meaning. In essence, to perform is to implicitly accept the limits on choice that enable a performer to conform to the situation, such that their actions can be understood *as* a performance by the audience. Even a wildly unconventional performance—say, screaming swearwords and dismantling one's instrument—is nevertheless (usually) framed and legitimised by the context of a performance space (the same actions performed alone in a public park would elicit a very different reaction from most witnesses).

Thus, as with a conversation, sense-making is constrained not just by the shared, structural provisos (grammar, vocabulary) that are the condition for conversing in the first place, but also by the unfolding context of the conversation, which is situated in a broader form-of-life even as it evolves and "wanders" with a "life of its own." Likewise, as improvising musicians perform together, their actions are both facilitated and constrained not only by socio-material provisos, but by emergent features (such as grooves) that operate with a degree of autonomy from the will of any individual performer. Thus we see that—on both the individual as well as the interpersonal ensemble level—improvisors are far from "free to do anything," but are always channelled, guided, and in tension with the broader dynamic in which they are participating.

Of course, this does not imply that individual agency plays *no* role, but only that sense-making is an intersubjective activity that is distributed across people, materials, spaces, and the music itself.

In our example of experimental improvised music, a player isn't *obliged* to join or continue with any groove that emerges. But at the same time, the structuring role of groove does mean that "dropping out" of or playing "against" a groove will nevertheless be heard *in contrast* to it, regardless of the specific wishes or intentions of that individual. The autonomy of groove, as an organising principle, means that it continues to structure the space of musical choices even across changes of personnel. While this much may be intuitive in overtly "groovy" musical styles, our analysis has shown a similar effect in an ostensibly "free" performance of experimental improvised music, with consequences for how we think about agency and choice in improvisation overall.

7. Conclusion

In this article we have explored musical sense-making both in theory and in the practice of musical improvisation. Centred on the example of "groove", we have looked at how what is most captivating in music are the particular subtleties and discrepancies that occur *between* musicians, and that imply a shared consciousness bound by an implicit structuring form, or what we initially called "the grid". Like a centre-of-gravity, a "grid" is both imaginary and yet has very real effects that enable and constrain musical possibilities within a particular social context. But taking a cue from Keil, we avoided the objectifying implications of this picture by emphasising its emergent dynamism, suggesting that many musical parameters (beyond rhythm, including timbral and other qualities) that function in this way are by no means fixed, and are constantly asserted anew as part of an ongoing, dialectical interpretation between participants.

This picture, we argued, aligns with the enactivist theory of "participatory sense-making", in which multiple agents are coupled together around an "emergent autonomous organisation" that responds to its creators with a sense of agency that is itself constituted by the normative structures of the event. We suggested that groove is an exemplar of this "autonomous" organisation within music, constraining certain decisions while enabling others as it holds together its various participants like a rhythmic centre of gravity.

We then sought to show this process in action, taking experimental improvised music as our medium. EIM's deliberate paucity of explicitly agreed-upon parameters means that the process of sense-making—present in all music—becomes especially overt. When a phenomenon like groove *does* emerge, its contingency and autonomy remain close to the surface. In our example with the Splitter Orchester, we saw a distinct groove arise through the action of multiple musicians, centred on an evolving and sometimes unheard pulse that belonged to everyone and no one, transmitted both temporally and spatially across the ensemble. From our privileged position as listeners, it also became clear how this emergent, unsteady groove structured the interpretation of the overall musical event, both while it was grooving and after it faded.

While groove is just one of the ways we make music, and music is just one of the ways we make sense of human life, our example here suggests a very concrete sense of how sense-making is an active, externalised process that involves not just other people, but the other-than-human

elements that emerge *between* us. Or perhaps more accurately, sense-making is a collective process of which our individual will and actions play just a part, being always structured by the inherited norms we bring to the situation. But importantly, for all the power of these norms, they are not fixed, being themselves both the condition and result of the same unfolding process.

Acknowledgements

The research presented in this paper was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) under grant ZK93—*(Musical) Improvisation and Ethics*. Thanks to the Splitter Orchester, and to musicians and audiences across the series of "Labs," for inspiring and informing our discussion. Thanks also to audiences at the Music in the Brain Online Groove Workshop, Khôra in Lower Austria, colleagues at the University of Vienna and University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz, and two anonymous referees, for helpful comments throughout the evolution of this paper.

Notes

[1] For example, many of the musicians we worked with in this project frequently spoke of music having a form of "agency".

> Robin Hayward (Splitter Orchester): "Phil Wachsmann [of the London Jazz Composers Orchestra] used to talk about how the music starts to play itself.... The feeling is the music's playing itself, you're not playing the music anymore.... And that's what I meant when I said I'm part of the interactive system."
>
> Roy Carroll (Splitter Orchester): "It's almost like [the music] starts happening by itself, and then you notice it, and then you have to decide what to do with it."

[2] While conversely, the sense that *not* everybody is attuned can have the opposite effect; even the most technically excellent music can feel flat in the face of a distracted or disinterested audience.

[3] However, Keil's own notion of participatory discrepancies was subtle and evolved over time, and it is unlikely he would fully agree with the "grid" concept that is implied by later authors.

[4] The word "sound" here refers to a group's intersubjective musical identity, and involves several different factors. A key one is timbre: how musicians balance and blend the their individual instruments in a room. But technical and acoustic parameters in single performances are just the beginning. As musicians play together over time, they develop unique collective histories, habits, repertoires, and styles of "conversational interplay" (Berliner 2009, 390). Participatory discrepancies between performers recur as they develop habits of responding to the music together, creating a recognizable whole that is experienced as the unique character or "sound" of a particular band or ensemble.

[5] "Co-ordination" here does not necessarily imply "co-operation". A dog and a rabbit can be locked in a single activity—"the chase"—where the actions of each creates affordances and hindrances that the other must react to in their pursuit of very different goals.

[6] Although I *can* say one thing while my tone or body language imply I mean something else. Such cases only accentuate the multiple cues and interactive nature of sense-making, but a simpler, everyday conversation will suffice as an example here.

[7] These dynamics are of course always present *in potentia* in more traditional bands, with the key difference being that participation and roles are largely decided in advance of the performance, and going on stage implies agreement.

[8] For an illustrative discussion of normativity and sense-making in experimental improvised music, see our recent audio essay (Williams and Bergamin 2025).

[9] See Gilbert Simondon (2020) for more on the concept of "metastability". Thanks to Scott McLaughlin for bringing to our attention the relevance of this notion to music.

[10] Three examples include 17:50–18:50, 21:00–23:10, 29:44–30:25 (Bailey and Tanaka 1993).

[11] At the time of performance. In contrast to many improvising ensembles and collectives, Splitter has a relatively stable lineup, although there have been several comings and goings since the band's founding in 2010.

[12] But see Bergamin (2024, 43–5) for a hermeneutic discussion of rhythm informed by an earlier Lab, and Bergamin (forthcoming) for a more extended phenomenological treatment of EIM.

[13] Currie (2016, 8 n.5) cites the well-known anecdote by Ian Carr (1971, 41), about a saxophonist "blackballed" from a free jazz session for playing a music-hall tune, of which Carr noted "you can play anything, but you can't play just anything."

[14] Whether by nature or culture—or both—is an open question (Clayton, Sager, and Will 2005), but makes no difference here.

[15] And indeed, musicians in EIM will often actively train themselves to resist the "natural" pull of a pulse, out of a concern to avoid "obvious" or unconscious musical decisions.

[16] There is, of course, a strong asymmetry in the audience's influence on the music with respect to the musicians, although this also varies by context. Classical or EIM audiences—typically expected to listen in silence—can exert very little influence on the sound production, compared with a jazz or EDM crowd whose active responses can push the band/DJ to take certain decisions or not.

Works Cited

Bailey, Derek, and Min Tanaka, dirs. 1993. *Mountain Stage*. VHS. Incus. Uploaded to Youtube 1 June, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH6MQFHYc4c.

Banerji, Ritwik. 2018. "Phenomenologies of Egalitarianism in Free Improvisation: A Virtual Performer Meets Its Critics." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.

Banerji, Ritwik. 2021. "Whiteness as Improvisation, Nonwhiteness as Machine." *Jazz and Culture* 4 (2): 56–84. https://doi.org/10.5406/jazzculture.4.2.0056.

Benson, Bruce. 2003. *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615924.

Bergamin, Joshua A. 2024. "The Participant Belongs to the Play: The Ethical Dimensions of Improvised Music." In *Gadamer, Music, and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, edited by Sam McAuliffe, 31–50. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41570-8.

Bergamin, Joshua A. forthcoming. "Habitually Breaking Habits: Agency, Awareness, and Decision-Making in Musical Improvisation." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-024-09974-x.

Berliner, Paul F. 2009. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. University of Chicago Press.

Blažanović, Marta. 2011. "Social History of the Echtzeitmusik Scene in Berlin." In *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Self-Defining a Scene*, edited by Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, and Andrea Neumann, 29–34. Wolke Verlag.

Borgo, David. 2014. "What the Music Wants." In *Soundweaving: Writings on Improvisation*, edited by Franziska Schroeder and Micheal Ó'hAodha, 33–52. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Butterfield, Matthew. 2010. "Participatory Discrepancies and the Perception of Beats in Jazz." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 27 (3): 157–76. https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2010.27.3.157.

Canonne, Clément, and Nicolas Garnier. 2015. "Individual Decisions and Perceived Form in Collective Free Improvisation." *Journal of New Music Research* 44 (2): 145–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/09298215.2015.1061564.

Carr, Ian. 1971. "Freedom and Fish Soup." *Melody Maker* 22 (May): 41.

Clark, Andy, and David Chalmers. 1998. "The Extended Mind." *Analysis* 58 (1): 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/58.1.7.

Clarke, E., M. Doffman, and L. Lim. 2013. "Distributed Creativity and Ecological Dynamics: A Case Study of Liza Lim's 'Tongue of the Invisible.'" *Music and Letters* 94 (4): 628–63. https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gct118.

Clayton, Martin, Rebecca Sager, and Udo Will. 2005. "In Time with the Music: The Concept of Entrainment and Its Significance for Ethnomusicology." *European Meetings in Ethnomusicology* 11:1–82.

Cobussen, Marcel. 2017. *The Field of Musical Improvisation*. Leiden University Press.

Cook, Nicholas. 2013. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199357406.001.0001.

Cook, Nicholas. 2017. "Scripting Social Interaction: Improvisation, Performance, and Western 'Art' Music." In *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, edited by Georgina Born, Will Straw, and Eric Lewis, 59–77. Duke University Press.

Corbett, John. 2016. *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226347462.001.0001.

Currie, Scott. 2016. "The Other Side of Here and Now: Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Politics of Improvisation Studies." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 11 (1–2): 1–10.

Danielsen, Anne. 2006. *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Wesleyan University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.125990.

De Jaegher, Hanne, and Ezequiel Di Paolo. 2007. "Participatory Sense-Making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6 (4): 485–507. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-007-9076-9.

Di Paolo, Ezequiel A., Elena Clare Cuffari, and Hanne De Jaegher. 2018. *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity between Life and Language*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11244.001.0001.

Doffman, Mark. 2009. "Making It Groove! Entrainment, Participation and Discrepancy in the 'Conversation' of a Jazz Trio." *Language & History* 52 (1): 130–47. https://doi.org/10.1179/175975309X452012.

Felver, Christopher, dir. 2005. *Cecil Taylor: All the Notes*. Filmhub.

Fermont, Cedrik, and Dimitri Della Faille. 2016. *Not Your World Music: Noise in South East Asia: Art, Politics, Identity, Gender and Global Capitalism*. Syrphe.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Penguin.

Hagberg, Garry L. 2016. "Ensemble Improvisation, Collective Intention, and Group Attention." In *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 1:481–99: Oxford University Press.

Høffding, Simon, and Kristian Martiny. 2016. "Framing a Phenomenological Interview: What, Why and How." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 15 (4): 539–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-015-9433-z.

Høffding, Simon, and Andrea Schiavio. 2021. "Exploratory Expertise and the Dual Intentionality of Music-Making." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20: 811–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-019-09626-5.

Høffding, Simon, and Torben Snekkestad. 2021. "Inner and Outer Ears: Enacting Agential Systems in Music Improvisation." In *Philosophy of Improvisation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, edited by Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding, and James McGuirk, 161–82. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003090076-13.

Iyer, Vijay. 2002. "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music." *Music Perception* 19 (3): 387–414. https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2002.19.3.387.

Janata, Petr, Stefan T. Tomic, and Jason M. Haberman. 2012. "Sensorimotor Coupling in Music and the Psychology of the Groove." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141 (1): 54–75. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024208.

Jost, Ekkehard. 1994. *Free Jazz*. Da Capo Press.

Keil, Charles. 1966. "Motion and Feeling Through Music." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24 (3): 337–49. https://doi.org/10.2307/427969.

Keil, Charles. 1987. "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music." *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (3): 275–83. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1987.2.3.02a00010.

Keil, Charles. 1995. "The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report." *Ethnomusicology* 39 (1): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/852198.

Krueger, Joel W. 2009. "Enacting Musical Experience." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16 (2–3): 98–123.

Krueger, Joel W. 2011. "Doing Things with Music." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10 (1): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-010-9152-4.

Lewis, George E. 1996. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (1): 91–122. https://doi.org/10.2307/779379.

Madison, Guy. 2006. "Experiencing Groove Induced by Music: Consistency and Phenomenology." *Music Perception* 24 (2): 201–8. https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2006.24.2.201.

McAuliffe, Sam. 2022. "The Inseparability of Player(s) and Artwork in Improvised Musical Performance." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 15 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.5408.

McAuliffe, Sam. 2023. *Improvisation in Music and Philosophical Hermeneutics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350338043.

Meelberg, Vincent. 2011. "Moving to Become Better: The Embodied Performance of Musical Groove." *Journal for Artistic Research*, no. 1. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/11612/11613.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1942) 1983. *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher. Duquesne University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. Routledge.

Meyer, Leonard B. 1956. *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. University of Chicago Press.

Peters, Gary. 2012. "Certainty, Contingency, and Improvisation." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 8 (2). https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v8i2.2141.

Roholt, Tiger C. 2014. *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance*. Bloomsbury.

Schiavio, Andrea, and Hanne De Jaegher. 2017. "Participatory Sense-Making in Joint Musical Practice." In *The Routledge Companion to Embodied Music Interaction*, edited by Micheline Lesaffre, Pieter-Jan Maes, and Marc Leman, 31–39. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315621364-4.

Schuiling, Floris. 2022. “Music As Extended Agency: On Notation And Entextualization In Improvised Music.” *Music and Letters* 103 (2): 322–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcab109.

Simondon, Gilbert. 2020. *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. Translated by Taylor Adkins. University of Minnesota Press.

Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press.

Solli, Mattias, and Thomas Netland. 2021. “Enacting a Jazz Beat: Temporality in Sonic Environment and Symbolic Communication.” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 61 (4): 485–504. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab048.

Taylor, Cecil. 1968. *Conquistador!* LP. New York: Blue Note.

Watson, Ben. 2004. *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*. Verso.

Wheeler, Michael. 2018. “Talking about More than Heads: The Embodied, Embedded and Extended Creative Mind.” In *Creativity and Philosophy*, by Gaut Berys and Kieran Matthew, edited by Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran, 230–50. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351199797-14.

Williams, Christopher A. 2022. “Composing with (Improvising) People: A Paramanifesto.” In *Wien Modern 35 Festivalkatalog. Essays.*, 2:159–64. Wien Modern, Verein für neue Musik.

Williams, Christopher A. Forthcoming. *Noise of the Spheres: On ((Experimental) Improvised) Music and Ethics*. Bloomsbury.

Williams, Christopher A., and Bergamin, Joshua. 2025. “Real-Time Norms: Grooves, Drones, and Sense-Making in Experimental Improvised Music.” *Seismograf Peer*. https://doi.org/10.48233/50.

Witek, Maria A. G. 2017. “Filling In: Syncopation, Pleasure and Distributed Embodiment in Groove.” *Music Analysis* 36 (1): 138–60. https://doi.org/10.1111/musa.12082.

Witek, Maria A. G., Eric F. Clarke, Mikkel Wallentin, Morten L. Kringelbach, and Peter Vuust. 2014. “Syncopation, Body-Movement and Pleasure in Groove Music.” Edited by Rouwen Canal-Bruland. *PLoS ONE* 9 (4): e94446. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0094446.

Biographies

Joshua Bergamin is a philosopher at the University of Vienna and co-PI of “(Musical) Improvisation and Ethics.”

Christopher A. Williams makes and researches (mostly) experimental music. He is Univ. Prof. of Artistic Research at the Gustav Mahler Private University for Music, and coordinator and co-PI of the “(Musical) Improvisation and Ethics” project at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz. As a composer and contrabassist, Williams’ work runs the gamut from chamber music, improvisation, and radio art to collaborations with dancers, sound artists, and visual artists.

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

SPEECH/ACT

KATIE SCHAAG SPELMAN COLLEGE

As a language play, *SPEECH/ACT* is a piece of performative writing (and writing for performance) exploring linguistic performativity. It personifies speech and action to stage a dialogue playfully testing the limits of J. L. Austin's famous claim in *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) that performative utterances cannot be "felicitous" within the theatre. As the character ACT contentiously notes in a footnote to Act III: "Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily 'hollow' or 'void' as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century." My text's humorous yet melancholic meditation on hollowness, emptiness, and the void—in relation to speech acts and linguistic performativity in particular, but also climate change and existential dread more broadly—moves across stylistic, tonal, affective, and structural registers to test the edges of narrative description and performative action. In the indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods, my script grammatically and syntactically stages speech and action as ambivalently entwined amidst a backdrop of continuously shifting theatrical, poetic, and philosophical contexts. Ultimately, it invites the reader to contemplate the criteria for "felicitous" performative utterances within a dematerialized theatre of the mind.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 10, NO 1 (2025):193–207
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2025.101520
ISSN 2057–7176

I.

SPEECH: Where are we speaking. To whom and toward what. In which context and under which domain. In whose favor. In whose name.

ACT: *How and in what ways are we speaking. In which way and toward what end. In what situation are we speaking. With what purpose and toward which aim.*

SPEECH: In what way and with which strategies. Under what constraints and with whose interests. With which convention and through which invocation. At what time and in what direction. In which guise and with what name.

ACT: *Toward which end and with whose means are we speaking. With what power and with what authority. With what intention and with what effect. On which grounds and under what oath are we speaking. Under whose name and beneath whose roof.*

SPEECH: Through which lens and at which angle. With what illocutionary force and with what perlocutionary impact. On which site and in what direction. Within what scene and upon which page.

ACT: *Toward which of us and whom among them. Among us an array of scenes. Between us our speech.*

II.

SPEECH/ACT: When it's all – said and done – when everything – has been said – and everything – has been done – that is – when it all – and it's said – when it is – when it's done – that is to say – when it's done and it's done – and when it's said and it's said – in fact – when it's said to be done and done to be said – I mean – to say a thing is to do a thing – or to do a thing is to say a thing – that is – when the time comes that everything that can be said, has been said – that is to say – when a time comes that everything that can be done, has been done – meaning that – if you had something to say you've said it – if you had something to do you've done it – if you had something to say then you found a way to say it – if you had something to do then you found a way to do it – and so has she – and so has she – and so has he – and so has he – and so have they – and so have they – and so have we – and so have we – and so we have said everything and done everything – we have said all there is to say and we have done all there is to do – so there is nothing left to say, and nothing left to do – there is nothing left to say – and nothing left to do – there is nothing left for any of us to say, and nothing left for any of us to do – nothing left for any of us to say or do or say or do – what do we do then? What do we do next? What do we say? What can we say? There is nothing left to do. There is nothing left to say. There is nothing left for any of us to do or say or do or say or do or say or do or say or do or say.

III.

SPEECH: So, let's take a step back. Dramatic fundamentals: scene, speech, action. Speech—which can take the form of monologue, dialogue, trialogue, multilogue, polylogue—or soliloquy, a special case of monologue—occurs when actors speak their scripted lines (indicated by their character's name in uppercase preceding the text) or a reader imagines characters speaking. Action—gesture, movement, things happening, embodied presence on the stage—is conveyed through stage directions, often italicized to set them apart from the dialogue, which the director instructs actors to follow (in the case of voice inflections, blocking, choreography, etc.) or which the reader imagines being followed. The playwright's directions may also be implemented by the scenographer, lighting designer, or sound designer (in the case of scene changes, lighting shifts, sound effects, etc.), or implemented by the reader upon their imaginary stage. Stage directions are a somewhat complicated formal case, since detailed descriptions of scenes sometimes read like novelistic passages (in contrast with instructions for actors, which usually take an abbreviated syntax).

ACT: So now let's actually take a step back *(takes a step back)*. I'm not sure it's accurate to associate action primarily with characters, if we take characters to be proxies for humans. Many elements are acting on the stage—the lighting acts, the sound acts, the set acts *(gestures widely)*—as Elam illuminates.[1] Performance is not limited to humans. Nonhuman actants permeate the stage; props are not inert objects but vibrant matter, as we have learned from Bennett.[2] Action precedes the subject, as we know from reading Butler.[3] Dialogue itself also performs, independently from the

[1] SPEECH: In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* ([1980] 2005), Keir Elam applies structuralist linguistics to the stage. (Footnotes are not usually appropriate in a dramatic script since their presence may disrupt a clear translation from script to performance, but if ACT insists upon making obscure references without context, it's my duty to ensure that you, the reader, are on the same page, even if this note will ultimately disappear from the stage.)

[2] SPEECH: Jane Bennett presents a philosophy of nonhuman actants in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). (Note that Bennett's work, like that of other Western new materialists, has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge traditions. For an Indigenous perspective on nonhuman animacy, see, for instance, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* [2013].) Theatrical case studies of more-than-human agency and performativity include Una Chaudhuri's *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zooesis and Performance* (2017) and Angenette Spalink's *Choreographing Dirt: Movement, Performance, and Ecology in the Anthropocene* (2024).

[3] SPEECH: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) merges existentialist and poststructuralist philosophy to theorize subjectivity as a process rather than a state. Also relevant to ACT's pompous lecture on performative language is Jacques Derrida on iterability in "Signature Event Context" ([1972] 1988), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker on (queer) cultural rituals in *Performativity and Performance* (1995), Butler on legal discourse in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Jon McKenzie on constraint

characters who read their lines, as Austin teaches us.[4] You, SPEECH, do more than you think.

SPEECH: For a creature of action, you're quite loquacious *(rolls eyes)*.

ACT: Another important consideration is the indicative vs. imperative mood. Stage directions, as you described them and as we both have enacted them *(points to italicized parentheticals)*, are usually written in the indicative mood, the language of description, of fiction and nonfiction prose. How strange that a formal element called a direction doesn't take the imperative, the language of commands. Although all language is performative to some extent, imperatives are a special case: they compel the receiver to do something. Do something, SPEECH. Speak!

SPEECH: I prefer the subjunctive. I'm not merely describing what already exists or obnoxiously making demands—I'm imagining what could exist. I'm wishing for something to happen. If only something felicitous were to happen. *I wish something were happening.*

---

vs. liberation in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), and Fred Moten on musical improvisation in *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition* (2003), all of which further develop and complicate J. L. Austin's speech act theory in linguistic, cultural, political, institutional, and aesthetic contexts. (Although ACT subsequently attributes to Austin the concept of a performative utterance detached from a speaker, it is actually Derrida who introduces this possibility in his theorization of iterability and citational rupture, followed by Butler, who argues that the performative utterance precedes and constitutes the gendered subject, not the other way around, allowing the possibility for a repetition with a difference to subvert the Foucauldian system which compels compulsory repetition of stylized acts. Austin's discussion of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, on the other hand, assumes an a priori speaker imbued with sincere intentionality, sanctioned authority, and relevant context.)

[4] ACT: See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* ([1955] 1975), for an introduction to speech act theory. Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily hollow or "void" as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century. As playwright Suzan-Lori Parks writes in her essay "Elements of Style" (1995), "words are spells"—powerful invocations that transform reality. (Really, SPEECH, stick to your own lines and stop footnoting mine. Let the future dramaturg do their job.)

IV.

SPEECH/ACT: How to Make Something Happen:

ACT: Shout into the void.

SPEECH: Query the void regarding its purpose and context.

ACT: Queer the void.

SPEECH: Query the overuse to the point of meaninglessness of "queer" as a verb.

ACT: Query the policing of boundaries around something as inherently fluid as queerness.

SPEECH: Query the obsession with fluidity to the point that all boundaries dissolve and everything is meaningless.

ACT: Queer the assumption that anything could ever be meaningless.

SPEECH: Gaze fondly at the void.

ACT: Approach the void.

SPEECH: Say "I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!" to the void.

ACT: I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!

SPEECH: ...

ACT: *I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!*

SPEECH: ...

ACT: ...

V.

SPEECH/ACT: We are united in our common desire to produce dramatic conflict. We animate protagonists and antagonists with things to say and things to do. We are choreographically poetic and verbally kinaesthetic. We resist tired binaries. We are united in our common desire.

SPEECH: Although we're speaking into a vacuum.

ACT: And moving without context.

SPEECH: We need a scene. We need a writer.

ACT: We need a set designer. We need a director.

SPEECH: Give me your lines.

ACT: What?

SPEECH. You heard me.

ACT: You already have the most lines; it's excessive to take mine as well.

SPEECH: Technically you shouldn't even be speaking.

ACT: I thought we agreed that language performs and actions speak.

SPEECH: Even so. I need your lines. I command you to surrender them: *Surrender your lines to me!*

ACT: …

SPEECH takes ACT's lines.

ACT becomes the SCENE.

SPEECH is paralyzed.

SCENE closes in. Encompasses the stage.

VI.

SCENE: Here I am, surrounded with myself, thinking in stage directions. When SPEECH stole my lines, I could no longer do any of the supposedly nonverbal physical movements associated with onstage action—I couldn't dance, I couldn't mime, I couldn't even gesture. I became inert, so I became the SCENE.

SPEECH: I'm feeling kind of guilty for stealing ACT's lines. Now that ACT disappeared, I've lost my voice. I suppose I needed ACT more than I thought. At least I have a context now. At least I have a SCENE.

SCENE: With both sets of lines in hand, SPEECH says nothing. I've adorned the proscenium stage with a beautifully designed backdrop and elaborate set. I've obtained a professional lighting rig, a top-tier sound system, even high-resolution video projection. All for what? For SPEECH to get stage fright, apparently.

SPEECH: The SCENE does look beautiful. If only I could say something to do it justice. I miss ACT. It wasn't so bad, I guess, ACT and I performing without any context. Nothing ever really seemed to go anywhere, but at least we could express ourselves, if not with performative utterances then at least with constative ones. I'm not sure where we go from here—if we can perform our way out of this.

SCENE: Right—I have the power to frame the entire drama. I set the scene and I control shifts in time and space. So I could return to the moment before SPEECH stole my lines, and try to make something different happen. But that would require me to give up all this power—to frame the stage and what happens here.

SPEECH: Maybe I can discover another way to speak. Maybe I can channel something beyond words and gestures. Move into the realm of scent or taste or touch. Maybe I can find a way to survive—to dissolve into this space and beyond it.

SPEECH merges with SCENE.

SCENE gazes at itself. Breathes. Begins.

VII.

SCENE: I'm moving through time and space, picking up objects, gathering threads. I am the time and space, I am the objects, I am the threads. You have no idea what it's like to be everything at once. The past, the present, the future. I try to manage my stress, channel my anxiety into productive tasks, take deep breaths. It's quite a responsibility to frame and manage everything that happens—anything at all that could happen. Proliferating possibilities dangling menacingly from the edges of the balconies. As if a heavy weight were bearing down on me. A compression of nerves. The fraying curtain barely conceals the backstage machinery. A sharp breath. The stage and everything that happens there, fluttering at the back of the throat.

VIII.

Although ACT is nowhere visible onstage, it has been hovering at the edges of the page—here it takes the form of VIII. Even as its physical capacities dissolved into the SCENE, its boldness persisted in the structuring logic of the play. The SCENE, after all, is merely a component of the ACT. A one-act play, a three-act play, perhaps even a five-act play or a nine-act play. Elegant numbers, chosen for their almost mystical capacity to structure meaning and produce a unified composition. Scenes, on the other hand—scenes have no structuring logic, no higher purpose, no elegant numerical patterns, just the pragmatic duty to contextualize the play and then mobilize it. Scenes have the illusion of control—just look at SCENE's indulgent soliloquy in the previous ACT. Anxious about its power, unaware that its power is highly contingent, SCENE is stuck inside the circulation of SPEECH. ACT is on the outside. ACT is the outside—the perimeter of the stage, the circumference of the proscenium arch, the gravitational law governing the emergence of the drama and its constitutive or hollow performativity. ACT's cold logic is not always benevolent. Even now it plots its next move: IX.

IX.

Blank stage. IX projects the following text onto the screen:

SPEECH stutters. ACT trips. SCENE falls apart. The horizon of possibility contracts. With a narrowing field of vision, the dramatis personae struggle to perform their scripted roles. The stage is blank and hollow. Staticky dust permeates the air. The lifeless props are scuffed, the shapeless costumes frayed. Something lingers downstage left: a hint of what was or could be, faintly glimmering amidst the dust. The things people said and what they did. How they treated each other and how they wished they could treat each other. How they imagined the world and how they hoped to change it. The perfect line uttered at exactly the right moment. The strange feeling that it was spoken for you and only you. The knowledge that the heroine was doomed from the beginning, but we'll act as if they have a chance, we'll accompany them on their lonely path, we'll gasp as if we're really surprised, as if there's still time, as if we don't already know how this will end.

AFTERWORD

As a language play, *SPEECH/ACT* is a piece of performative writing (and writing for performance) exploring linguistic performativity. It personifies speech and action to stage a dialogue playfully testing the limits of J. L. Austin's famous claim in *How to Do Things with Words* ([1955] 1975) that performative utterances cannot be "felicitous" within the theatre. As the character ACT contentiously notes in a footnote to Act III: "Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily 'hollow' or 'void' as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century." My text's humorous yet melancholic meditation on hollowness, emptiness, and the void—in relation to speech acts and linguistic performativity in particular, but also climate change and existential dread more broadly—moves across stylistic, tonal, affective, and structural registers to test the edges of narrative description and performative action. Inspired by Austin's own self-consciously playful rhetorical unfolding of his argument (through a sequence of hypotheses, criteria, conditions, case studies, inconsistencies, and modifications), I mobilize formal elements of scriptwriting like stage directions, dialogue, and act/scene structure as characters with agency to continuously transform the logic of the text. Following a sequence of metatheatrical breaks and metaperformative utterances, the tragicomic final act performs an end of its metatextual world, beginning with "SPEECH stutters. ACT trips. SCENE falls apart. The horizon of possibility contracts." and ending with deferral. The final sentence in Act IX stages a series of "as if" clauses, culminating with "as if we don't already know how this will end" (which references the lines "Yeah, you already know / How this will end" from the song "How It Ends" by DeVotchKa [2004]); the finality of this ending about endings is undermined by the subjunctive mood, which invokes a closure that is also an opening. Synthesizing theory and practice, thinking and doing, and philosophy and performance, *SPEECH/ACT* refuses to settle between script and performance. In doing so, it situates the scholarly field of performance philosophy in dialogue with the creative practice of experimental scriptwriting to explore a shared commitment to the conceptual and aesthetic materiality of language in art and everyday life. In the indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods, my script grammatically and syntactically stages speech and action as ambivalently entwined amidst a backdrop of continuously shifting theatrical, poetic, and philosophical contexts. Ultimately, it invites the reader to contemplate the criteria for "felicitous" performative utterances within a dematerialized theatre of the mind.

In Act III's performative footnotes, SPEECH and ACT dispute the lineage of speech act theory. Building upon the canonical philosophers of performativity referenced in the footnotes, my work is also in conversation with experimental poet Joan Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words* (1998), which tests Austin's claim that performative language does not occur in the context of poetry; playwright Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words I* ([1957] 1958), which severs speech and action onstage; scholar Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (2002), which historicizes and theorizes the rise of printed drama and novelistic stage directions; poet Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation" ([1926] 1967), which performatively theorizes "the continuous present"; poet S. Brook Corfman's *The Anima: Four Closet Dramas* (2019), which scripts elements of dramatic structure as characters merging; and writers/artists Mike Corrao and Evan

Isoline's *Cephalonegativity: On the Theater of Decapitation* (2021), which severs mind and body on the page/stage. Extending from this hybrid lineage, my script dramatizes the longstanding question of whether a performative utterance within a theatrical context might be considered felicitous, playing out a sequence of conditions within a collision of scholarly and literary writing genres to destabilize the terms of the debate and invite performance philosophers to consider this question anew.

Between experimental poetry, playwriting, and performance philosophy, *SPEECH/ACT* takes the form of what I call a "conceptual play," a capacious genre with roots in closet drama, poets' theatre, the historical avant-garde, and late modernist / early contemporary conceptual art. Anticipating conceptual art's rejection of material art objects in favor of scripted instructions for creating ephemeral actions, "conceptual plays" reject the material theatre in favor of stage directions for enacting site-specific performances for the mind. Scholars including Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole (2010), Taylor Hagood (2010), Martin Puchner (2002), Daniel Sack (2017), Mike Sell (2005), and Nick Salvato (2010) have theorized and archived iterations of this genre; in my dissertation research I tracked its innovation in Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts poetry and playwriting (e.g., Marita Bonner, Jean Toomer, Amiri Baraka, and Ed Bullins) in conversation with minoritarian visual, conceptual, and performance art scores (e.g., Tehching Hsieh, Yoko Ono, and Adrian Piper). Recent examples of the genre within the small press literary publishing landscape—in addition to S. Brook Corfman's *The Anima: Four Closet Dramas* (2019) and Mike Corrao and Evan Isoline's *Cephalonegativity: On the Theater of Decapitation* (2021), mentioned above—include *Arcadia, Indiana* by Toby Altman (Plays Inverse, 2017), *The Immeasurable Want of Light* by Daaimah Mubashshir (3 Hole, 2018), *Embarrassed of the (W)Hole* by Panoply Performance Laboratory (Ugly Duckling: Emergency Playscripts, 2023), and *Meronymy* by Rachel Jendrzejewski (53rd State, 2024). Daniel Sack's edited collection *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (2017) as well as his online journal *Imagined Theatres* (www.imaginedtheatres.com) gathers short conceptual texts by a range of theatre and performance practitioners and scholars. Christina Aushana, Michael Berman, Yelena Gluzman, and Sarah Klein's *Feminist Theory Theater Reading Room* (www.feministtheorytheater.org; see also Aushana et al. 2024) is another promising curatorial framework for new hybrid work. In the realm of experimental poetry, my archive of conceptual plays situates the performative language of Joan Retallack's self-consciously titled *How to Do Things with Words* (1998) in dialogue with, for instance, Lisa Robertson's metadramatic verse in *XEclogue* ([1993] 1999), Douglas Kearney's visual typography and sonic syntax in *The Black Automaton* (2009), and Joyelle McSweeney's musical polylogue in *Percussion Grenade* (2012).

SPEECH/ACT is part of my manuscript in process, *The Moon Appears Upon the Stage and Other Conceptual Plays*, a collection of experimental playscripts that includes writing for performance and performative writing, stageable poems and unstageable performance scores, and (im)possible instructions for possible worlds. Several pieces in my collection were written in response to Una Chaudhuri and the Climate Lens Collective's *Climate Lens Playbook* (2023), a manifesto for eco-theatre that centers nonhuman entities as active agents rather than passive props or settings. *A Plastic Theatre*, for instance (originally published in *Imagined Theatres* in 2019 and adapted as a libretto for Joanna Marsh's musical composition *A Plastic Theatre* in 2024), stages a dystopian

future-present in which plastic's ubiquitous presence extends into human and nonhuman bodies. In *SPEECH/ACT*, the anthropocentric personification of speech and action temporarily renders the abstract concepts of language and embodiment as concrete entities with agency, though these provisional subjects ultimately dissolve into objects of the script's disciplinary formal mechanics.

Works Cited

Altman, Toby. 2017. *Arcadia, Indiana: (A Tragedy)*. Plays Inverse.

Aushana, Christina, Michael Berman, Yelena Gluzman, and Sarah Klein. n.d. *Feminist Theory Theater Reading Room*. https://www.feministtheorytheater.org/.

Aushana, Christina, Yelena Gluzman, Michael Berman, and Sarah Klein. 2024. "Feminist Theory Theater: Acts of Reading as Embodied Pedagogy." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 10 (1–2): 405–27. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2023.1491.

Austin, J. L. (1955) 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J. O. Urmson. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198245537.001.0001.

Bay-Cheng, Sarah, and Barbara Cole, eds. 2010. *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama*. Bloomsbury.

Beckett, Samuel. (1957) 1958. *Endgame: A Play in One Act, Followed by Act Without Words, a Mime for One Player*. Grove Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge.

Chaudhuri, Una. 2017. *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zooësis and Performance*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315745237.

Chaudhuri, Una, with members of Climate Lens. 2023. "Dis-Anthropocentric Performance: The Climate Lens Playbook." *TDR/The Drama Review* 67 (1): 41–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000740.

Corfman, S. Brook. 2019. *The Anima: Four Closet Dramas*. GaussPDF. https://www.gauss-pdf.com/post/184716271203/gpdf279gpdfe043-s-brook-corfman-the-anima.

Corrao, Mike, and Evan Isoline. 2021. *Cephalonegativity: On the Theater of Decapitation*. Apocalypse Party.

Derrida, Jacques. (1972) 1988. "Signature Event Context." In *Limited Inc*, edited by Gerald Graff and Jeffrey Mehlman, translated by Samuel Weber. Northwestern University Press.

DeVotchKa. 2004. "How It Ends." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pfi1UQ_PKQI.

Elam, Keir. (1980) 2005. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. 2nd edn. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203993309.

Hagood, Taylor. 2010. *Secrecy, Magic, and the One-Act Plays of Harlem Renaissance Women Writers*. Ohio State University Press.

Jendrzejewski, Rachel. 2024. *Meronymy*. 53rd State.

Kearney, Douglas. 2009. *The Black Automaton*. National Poetry Series Books.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Marsh, Joanna, and Katie Schaag. 2024. *A Plastic Theatre (for Mezzo Soprano Soloist, SATB Choir, and Orchestra)*. https://www.joannamarsh.co.uk/product/a-plastic-theatre-mezzo-soprano-soloist-satb-choir-and-orchestra/.

McKenzie, Jon. 2001. *Perform Or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420058.

McSweeney, Joyelle. 2012. *Percussion Grenade: Poems & Plays.* Fence Books.

Moten, Fred. 2003. *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mubashshir, Daaimah. 2018. *The Immeasurable Want of Light*. 3 Hole.

Panoply Performance Laboratory. 2023. *Embarrassed of the (W)Hole*. Emergency Playscripts. Ugly Duckling Presse.

Parker, Andrew, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds. 1995. *Performativity and Performance*. Routledge.

Parks, Susan-Lori. 1995. "Elements of Style." In *The America Plays and Other Works*. Theater Communications Group.

Puchner, Martin. 2002. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Retallack, Joan. 1998. *How to Do Things with Words*. Sun & Moon Press.

Robertson, Lisa. (1993) 1999. *XEclogue*. New Star Books.

Sack, Daniel, ed. 2017. *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315264950.

Sack, Daniel, ed. n.d. *Imagined Theatres*. https://www.imaginedtheatres.com/.

Salvato, Nick. 2010. *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*. Yale University Press.

Schaag, Katie. 2019. "A Plastic Theatre." *Imagined Theatres* 3. https://www.imaginedtheatres.com/a-plastic-theatre/.

Sell, Mike. 2005. *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement*. University of Michigan Press.

Stein, Gertrude. (1926) 1967. "Composition as Explanation." In *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1909–1945*, edited by Patricia Meyerowitz, 21–30. Penguin.

Spalink, Angenette. 2024. *Choreographing Dirt: Movement, Performance, and Ecology in the Anthropocene*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164234.

Biography

Katie Schaag is an artist-scholar researching plasticity, performativity, ecological performance, queer femme aesthetics, conceptual theatre, and minoritarian avant-gardes. An Assistant Professor of Theatre & Performance at Spelman College with an English PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, her writing appears in *Performance Research*, *Modern Drama*, *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy*, *Esse*, *Imagined Theatres*, and elsewhere.