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The Gift of Acting

Abstract: *This section deals with certain preconceptions concerning thought, affect, and physicality. The jouissance of actors at play is examined: the knowledge and intelligence of their bodies, and their linguistic abilities in dialogue and communication with one another, as well as the art within their repetitions. All of these qualities and skills are accompanied by a physical feeling of not being the sovereign subject of one's own acting. The embodied dispositif of the Enlightenment proves to be an illusion when tested on one's own body, a chimera that gets in the way of acting.*

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Skipping

Actors often step out of line. They are not necessarily protesting against anything in particular. Politics is not usually their strong point. They just do not like being domesticated. It is hard to be creative if you let yourself be constrained by society's rules. Creativity is always also about breaking rank. Hardly any artistic work can be done without fractures and fissures, without the desire for – and need of – a surplus of independence and freedom.

But what is it that leads actors in particular to fall out of line, to resist the restrictions of conformity? Do they share some characteristic that explains their penchant for this particular brand of insubordination?

Looking more closely at the idiom "to step out of line," it is interesting that disturbing the given order is combined with the verb to step. Despite the military drums that measure these steps, the image to which this idiom gives rise is not necessarily confrontational. Instead we visualize a superfluous, unruly sidestep, a liberation from constraint – twisting away, not putting up fists. If we think of a line dance, what does this sole dancer who disobeys the rules do? Before our inner eye, we see them leave the rigid formation, deviate from the choreography, and start to skip. Just because. Because it is fun and because being good and following orders is so boring, so monotonous. If you like, you can imagine a guileless gaze to go with this small skip, or a satisfied smile that comes from the pleasure of the unseemly.

When we look at it like this, the destructiveness of disturbance is playfully transformed into musical dissonance.

Read in this way, actors' general propensity to resist norms and transgress set rules can be seen as a kind of side-stepping leap. It is a guileless carrying-on that is driven by fantasy, by the joy of creation. It is the way children sometimes skip exuberantly when they have not yet been "tamed" and still playfully express their lust for life. Even Plato mentioned this tendency of the young to skip unexpectedly for no discernable reason: "For men say that the young of all creatures cannot be quiet in their bodies or in their voices; they are always wanting to move and cry out; some leaping and skipping, and overflowing with sportive-

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ness and delight at something, others uttering all sorts of cries."[1] Sensible adults do not usually act this way. It would be improper and embarrassing. Adults may not always be well-mannered and demure, but they do not act like fools. That is what is expected of them and, of course, they fulfill these expectations. They follow the same drummer or perhaps the whistle. They march in rank and file if told to and even let themselves be drilled, whatever the cost. Children are not as easy to train. Discipline gets in their way. It conflicts with their need to move, to play. If you do not make them walk calmly beside you, they immediately start to skip and dance, or to dally. Just for fun, out of pure joy, for pleasure. They are driven by teeming, overflowing energy that cannot be administered and that no one can make money out of. There is no understanding this logically. That small, unplanned, extra skip just emerges for no evident reason, with no particular aim. It justifies itself, just as art and friendship exist for their own sake.

Can't the actor, *homo ludens*, be characterized by just this playful overflow? At work and at home, in disposition and habitus. Isn't his permanent openness to escapades the precise source of his creativity, which society half admires and envies and half disdains?

Max Reinhardt's language is strange to us today. We tend to be put off by the way he speaks, because the words he chooses no longer speak to us. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to repeat here the famous line from his "Rede über den Schauspieler," his lecture about acting held in 1928 at Columbia University:

> I believe in the immortality of the theater, it is the most joyous hideaway for all those who have secretly stuck their childhood into their pockets and run off with it, to play on to the end of their days.[2]

What else is Reinhardt talking about in this declaration of love other than the actor's talent for that superfluous, childish skip, the jump for joy

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1 Plato, *The Laws*, *Book II*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 34. See also Johannes Bilstein, "Spiel-Glück und Glücks-Spiele," in *Maske und Kothurn, Dies ist kein Spiel* 4 (2008), 69.

2 Max Reinhardt, "Rede über den Schauspieler," in Hugo Fetting (ed.) *Leben für das Theater. Briefe, Reden, Aufsätze, Interviews, Gespräche, Auszüge aus Regiebüchern* (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1989), 436.

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that shifts the world and life itself back into the realm of the unpredictable? Whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, this fragility of the prescribed is not limited to any particular content or development. It is part of all performative power which, in actuality, becomes the act, the manifestation, the event.

Usually, actors do not advocate any explicitly political cause. But are they not nevertheless per se "political" insofar as we might consider them to be the subversive disrupters of any behavior that acquiesces with the system? No matter what the performance is about, is not their propensity for a surprise turn, an unpredictable, gratuitous jump, is not their overflowing imagination and everything that continually seduces them to make up their language and inflection, their movements and their acts, is not this their own special form of resistance to all prescribed ways of thinking, to all norm-referenced behavior? In that superfluous skip, are not actors able to use the opportunity for free play that has been granted to them, to indulge in a little distancing dance (*Dis-tanz*) against the metalanguage of marketization and efficiency that has begun to increasingly pressure and rule over us all?

Prejudice

Prejudices simplify. They pack a punch and therefore live long. You think you have risen above them, that they have died, and then they unexpectedly peek out from behind the wings, or from the heads and hearts of the actors in which they have been slumbering. They are just waiting for their cue. In this case, it is the prejudice against thinking. This antipathy has built itself a nice little nest. As if thinking were the enemy of artistic, and thus also of performative, talent. As if imagination and creativity were not just disturbed and inhibited by the act of thinking, but poisoned and thwarted. As if sensuousness competed with the intellect and one needed to secede from, or even be sacrificed to, the other.

"Don't think, play!" (*Denk' net, spü!*) is an admonition sometimes heard in the theaters of Vienna. Speaking of prejudice, perhaps this distaste for thinking is a Viennese phenomenon. Maybe it is in the Viennese blood, the blood of this city that is so head over heels in love with the theater. Maybe. Who knows? But what other city still calls its stars *Lieblinge*?

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I have even heard one of these *darlings*, bumped into by accident, call out "don't push me, I'm a *Liebling*." But anecdotes aside, where else do people fight so vehemently about theater, where else are actors honored so publicly as in Vienna? In life and in death. Honorary members of the Burgtheater Vienna have the privilege of – it is true! – being laid out after death at the top of the theater's grand staircase. A black carpet replaces the red for the occasion, and the entrance is draped with silver-tasseled black velvet curtains. The gravity of the curtains and the change from the theater's usual red and gold to the black and silver of death creates a powerful effect. People automatically pause, stop what they are doing to look. It is impossible to ignore this signal. The Grim Reaper makes his presence known and evokes strong images. After an official mourning ceremony on the staircase, with much aplomb in the presence of members of the government and, of course, the Burgtheater board, the pallbearers perform a ritual circling of the theater accompanied by a band, colleagues, fans, and passersby. It even used to be customary for the procession to circle the theater three times.

This is how Vienna shows its love for its departed actors. Eros and Thanatos are, of course, particularly intimate to Vienna, the city of Sigmund Freud, which leads us to another way of reading the actor's old prejudice against thinking. Could it be the return of the repressed, emotional remnants of Austro–Catholic Baroque resistance against Prusso–Protestant intellectualization and ideologization of the performative arts?

Curtain on the small jumps and skips. Curtain on the escapades.

The idea that thinking is the enemy of performative talent is not only questionable but also worth interrogating. Moving beyond the countless anecdotes about Viennese theater and a possible geographical/cultural heritage, the question remains as to what practical value theoretical and aesthetic reflection might hold for actors. *Let others worry about that. I just want to act.* Why shouldn't we just preserve the proven division of labor and leave theory – *theoria* – to the directors, dramatic advisers, theater studies majors, and, last but not least, the arts and theater pages. Why? Because with time it makes a difference whether or not an actor has also been interested in theory, in the power of discourses past and present. And it makes not just a theoretical difference but also a difference in corporeal experience. This knowledge informs his acting. Slowly, successively, it becomes inscribed in his body whether or not he has

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tried out or ignored different aesthetic forms, whether he has asked or refrained from asking ethical questions, and whether and how he has answered the question of art. The answer he has given will give his face an expression, will make his body matter or not,[3] and with time, in the course of an actor's life, it will bring out the difference between one actor and another. You only need to watch the stage closely. This is not a moral judgment. Luckily, it takes all kinds.

The question remains of the concept of thinking that is inimical to actors. What do actors, and by no means only actors, mean by *thinking* when this prejudice takes hold of their heads and hearts?

Theater and thinking have long had an ambivalent relationship involving a conflict, the roots of which go back to antiquity.

*On the one hand, ancient philosophers considered the act of thinking, in analogy to theater, as the practice of contemplation (*theoria*), in which the person philosophizing could, in a state of amazement (*thaumázeo*) apprehend the actual truth (*óntos on theós*). On the other hand, Plato in particular believed theater was the adversary of thinking because, due to its intimacy with the realm of the emotions, it is closest to that part of being human which is furthest removed from the best in us – the noetic realm of reason.*[4]

Is this philosophy's early, precritical, defensive reaction to theater as the barbarism of affect – and has theater avenged the critical abilities of thought with an accusation of the tyranny of reason? Is this the fly in the ointment? What about the excluded middle? The devil only knows where the excluded middle has got to.

This is not to gloss over, ignore, or belittle the differences between the characteristics of philosophers and actors. These differences are valuable. Not everybody can or should be able to do everything. Different professions require different proclivities that must be defended, whether contentiously or with longing. But what are these characteristics?

3 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

4 Arno Böhler, "TheatrReales Denken," in idem., and Susanne Granzer (ed.), *Ereignis Denken. TheatRealität–Performanz–Ereignis* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2009), 11.

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Which traits does the actor acquire due to his profession and which the philosopher? And where are their respective blind spots? What is underexposed and ignored, because the thinker and the player are deaf to them, whether out of conviction or just the pretense that this or that ability is contraindicative and would not be good for their own profession?

What is this assumption grounded upon, this preconceived opinion, this ominous pool of mutual distrust? What do we stand to lose? What is shut out, forgotten? And what set in stone?

Subject-based thinking versus stage experience

The theatrical subject is not an autonomous subject. This is the disquieting, irritating experience of being on stage.

On a non-discursive level, this quickly becomes clear in the praxis of acting. The actor acts within his material embodiment; he cannot disregard it or skip over it. It makes him unable to cheat himself. He has obviously been given over to his body, and whatever else he does, he has to let it play. It has a say whether he likes it or not. Because of this "medial" character of acting, instrumental reason soon has to forfeit its position of authority. While the possibility of success is certainly related to the actor's ability and talent, it remains at the mercy of the fragile and lucky felicitousness of the performance. All actors, not just stage actors, must capitulate to the providence of felicitous success.

That rubs us the wrong way. The enlightenment idea of the subject is the other way around. Subjectivity is rather "the power of success – [...] the ability to let effective acts succeed. The name of this ability or power to permit success is 'reason.'"[5] Enlightenment as subject-based thinking thus means being liberated into the autonomy of our free will, given the all-encompassing power of reason.

Reason should guarantee that we can allow reality to succeed, that we can bring it under our subjective control. This is what we have learned; it

5 Christoph Menke, "Subjektivität und Gelingen: Adorno – Derrida," in Eva L.-Waniek and Erik M. Vogt (eds.), *Derrida und Adorno – Zur Aktualität von Dekonstruktion und Frankfurter Schule* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 190. Unpublished translation by Gerrit Jackson.

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is deeply ingrained in us. And in all truth, who can resist the exonerating prospect of holding the key to success in their own two hands? Every failure thus becomes something we have done and consequently something we can repair if we only enhance and develop our ability. That takes away the uncertain and tragic elements of living that sometimes befall us as if from some external source. In light of the blows and breakdowns that no doubt everyone knows, you have to admit that a "reason machine" sounds pretty attractive, a lot more seductive than being exposed to the unassailable difference that connects ability and felicitous success. It is much better to optimistically rescind the difference between ability and success, between talent and felicity and identify each separately, ignoring the uncontrolled overflow inherent to their connection. An apologetics of numerals quietly begins to thrive.

On this occasion, we might be proud to present Herr Calculator in a Viennese farce perhaps entitled Skirmish on Wall Street or Lady Luck's Frame of Mind. He is wearing a crown on his head that has slipped down at an angle and he looks a bit disheveled despite his custom-made suit and expensive tie. But he smiles unperturbed – and the public greets its Liebling *with roaring applause. Curtain.*

The concept of enlightenment as the "(affirmative) theory of the subject's power, of the subject as power"[6] still – despite critical theory, poststructuralism, and deconstruction – infiltrates the idea we have of ourselves. Its modern form, subject-based thinking, "reduces whatever it may encounter as the substance of a sensation or a thought [...] to the subject of this sensation or this thought."[7] And this reduction is the base from which we automatically create the soups and sauces of ideas. This return to enlightenment subject-based thinking is archived thought; it has already taken place in the past. It is history that has entered our bodies. We can observe it in our own habitus and that of others. Our flesh and blood is the site of this archive, whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. Subject-based thinking is so ingrained it seems "natural" to us. It is our historical homestead, our *calvary*. It lives in the syntax of our language, in the underlying structure of subject and predicate, which suggests that "I" always "do" something, that "I"

6 Ibid., 189.

7 Ibid.

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am master over "my" actions. Our grammar constantly turns us into perpetrators.[8]

Thus we break with and ignore everything to do with passivity, with the pathic, with everything that can and does befall us without warning. The ego is seen not only as the precondition of being able to feel something but also and at the same time as the cause of and reason for those feelings. However, while the ego *is* the precondition for being able to feel something, feelings do not introduce themselves; rather, we are overcome by them. We are stricken by them. Disappointment hurts, fear lames us, hate distorts us, and we are thrown into chaos. Calamities befall us; happiness is not something we can calculate, not even the happiness of the high card, the greatest number.

Theater is incendiary. It can inflame the enlightenment concept of the subject and the pragmatism of analytical abstract thought, which seeks to calm itself with quantifiable criteria. The stage attacks the dominance of such rational, causal thought. The ego is exposed; its sovereignty is assaulted, shaken at its core because of this vulnerable exposition. This is meant as a literal occurrence, not as a figurative image. A painful event that causes discomfort. Offends. The tower of our modern self-assurance begins to crack. Not theoretically, but dramatically, involving all senses. Physically, because on stage the actor has to deliver, with his own body, the tenacious problem of modernity's collective interpretation of the self. He is forced into facing the experience that the ego is not the master of its own house, that whether or not he succeeds is not a matter of free will. He has no control over it, and no normative structure in the world can give it to him. No talent, no system, no method. Whether or not his acting is felicitous is out of his hands and thus uncertain. It is bestowed upon him.

8 "Language belongs in its origin to the age of the most rudimentary form of psychology: we find ourselves in the midst of a rude fetishism when we call to mind the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language – which is to say, of *reason*. It is *this* which sees everywhere deed and doer; this which believes in will as cause in general; this which believes in the 'ego', in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and which *projects* its belief in the ego-substance on to all things [...]." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin 1990), 48. Italics in the original.

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This is the unexpected earnestness that the actor faces, the thorn in his flesh. Neither success nor failure can help him over this hurdle, and it is something that plagues his whole career, not just its beginnings.[9] Make no mistake about that. No matter how long an actor practices his art, no matter how much ability he acquires over time, no matter how well he masters the craft, he will never lose his own shadow. Whether or not his acting is felicitous will always be up in the air. The eventfulness of playing in the theater necessarily leads the actor to oscillate between power and impotence,[10] between activity and passivity, between being perpetrator and victim. In-between. These contradictions are inadequately, paradoxically bound to one another. Promising and ominous.

Master and servant

"'I'm my own master' said the servant, and cut off his foot."[11] That is Bertolt Brecht's caustic ironic comment on the subject of master and slave. Not a bad theatrical description of the *physical* attacks, the wounds inflicted upon the actor "by himself." For the prevailing subject, the discovery of the unassailable difference between ability and success, between power and impotence, between acting and being acted upon becomes a "bloody" self-injury. The ego is subjected to "amputation" of and by its own body, which rebels. Is it perhaps even "beheaded," cut down?

There is a German theater saying: "The other actors play the king." No one can act the role of ruler believably if his or her colleagues do not play along. Even the best actor is powerless to change that. The ego on stage is in a similar predicament. No one is letting him play king. It is not working. The ego, the king, has been dethroned. He is a servant in his own house, but it is not because of how colleagues are acting, or because of a critic who wrote a bad review, or a booing audience. No, it

9 These problems should not be confused with whether or not an actor has "talent." That is not what this is about. In this study of actors, their talent is a given.

10 Sybille Krämer, "Was ist ein Medium? Über Boten, Engel, Viren, Geld und andere Medien," in GRENZ-film (ed.), *Philosophy On Stage* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2007).

11 Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle,* trans. Stefan Brecht, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1976).

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is a narcissistic wound that the subject inflicts upon itself. Threatened by its own self, it can no longer be sure of itself. Without wanting to, it becomes lost, loses itself. That is the wound.

The continuous acid test that the actor must undergo is that his profession *physically* forces him not only to endure but also to be the carrier of the unwelcome incursion of passivity. He is at the mercy of the paradox of doing and leaving be, and he must, if he is to act well, embody the creative fusion of *actio* and *passio* within his being.

Despite everything that has been said about the stage, one could at this point just shrug one's shoulders and retort that in the 21st century, the problems posed by the early modern concept of the subject have long been overcome. We have understood them, caught up with them, and gone beyond them. Why insist upon the actor's *embodied effect*?

Why?

Since the actor is our guinea pig, to answer why, we should examine the practice of theater and look at one of the problems we often see in beginners. A role is attempted for the first time. Preliminary stage directions are developed. During the rehearsals to follow, this first draft takes on a life of its own. Many young actors automatically follow these initial directions as if they were remote controlled. They stand at the same cue, sit down at the same cue, lie down at the same cue, and so forth (and their speech follows this same pattern). It is as if the directions were an invisible safety rail that they must hold on to, which gives them unfounded confidence in their vulnerable state. They follow the directions "without thinking," as we say. Extraordinarily, the actors themselves are unaware of this. It happens without their registering it. What is more, when the play begins to take off, beginners often return to the old stage directions. In an emotional situation, they seem to reappear by themselves and superimpose themselves on newer solutions.

In light of this phenomenon, with regard to a grand narrative such as the Enlightenment, we must ask, what is the inscription of a few hours compared to the inscription of a few centuries?

The theorist is in a different position. He is spared the passion of the actor. His performances are first and foremost conceptual, not sensate. He reflects humankind's historical self-interpretation from a distance. While these ideas befall the actor's body and grab him by the collar, the theorist keeps them at bay with his intellect, so he may understand them abstractly.

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When the theorist questions the concept of the physical body, he can keep it from getting to his own body. He objectifies it reflectively, looks at it from the outside. That he thus disregards his own materiality is a fact that is usually overlooked. And the theorist, protected by the distance of reflection, can also overlook this fact, since he only thinks formally about the physical nature of his own subjectivity. His task is to fulfill the scientific maxim of objectivity; otherwise, his work is given no credence.

This is not to say that the theorist has no passion. But the historical/cultural placement of the ego outside the body means that the theoretician's body is only theoretically, not practically, in the line of fire of his thought. His battlefield is the paper, the computer screen; it is not (his own) flesh that is under attack.[12] To deconstruct a reigning discourse in writing is not the same as to correct, transform, and supplement it *physically*, with one's own body. This demands great exertion, because one's own phenomenal body,[13] with all historically contingent inscriptions, also plays a role. It must break all resistance, overcome all automatic behavior. The body starts acting up when forced to leave its usual, daily territory.[14] It expresses its own desires, begins to live an unwanted life of its own, which (usually) is not even noticed by the person himself, or, if so, only as a diffuse feeling of physical indisposition, as a feeling of embarrassment.

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12 On the 20th-century rediscovery of the "flesh" as a philosophical category, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

13 On the term "phenomenal body," see Fischer-Lichte, chapter 4. In this chapter she discusses the problem of the traditional dichotomy of body and mind in Western thought: "Man is embodied mind. [...] The mind cannot exist without the body; it articulates itself through physicality" (99). She sees an astonishing parallel in the work of the great man of Polish theater Jerzy Grotowski: "The actor no longer lends his body to an exclusively mental process but makes the mind appear through the body, thus granting the body agency" (82), and in the late philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*: "The body is always already connected to the world through its 'flesh.' [...] In this sense, the body transcends each of its instrumental and semiotic functions through its fleshiness" (83).

14 For example, the body that best fits today's fitness and beauty ideal is of limited use to meet the demands of theater. It is too hard, too impervious, a block of muscle that blocks the breath from flowing. Releasing these tensions and blockages takes hard work and patience.

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"I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy," says Alice to the Cheshire Cat "'All right,' said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. 'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!'"[15]

Reworking the cultural and personally codified archive in one's own body and replacing the significant material traces of the body's ritual repetitiveness, its norms and registers, with new ones *at the material site of their occurrence* is difficult, more difficult than one would imagine. This kind of deconstruction and critical transformation of one's own body hurts. It cannot occur without passion. It carries pathos in itself.

The actor is exposed by this pathos of the flesh. He cannot ignore it, cannot disregard his own materiality. He must be creative in the conditions of his own embodiment. There is no way he cannot literally trip over himself and fall. The physical exposition of his art automatically confronts him with all the phenomena of human existence, with all its individual, cultural, and historical inscriptions. And he must carry and deliver all of his "flaws" and all his "insights" within his own body.

For this reason, the figure of the actor is a good *subject* of study in the laboratory of being. The rejected and neglected passive side of our existence passes before our eyes; the actor makes us see the two-edged gift of the event of his exposure, so that we, like Alice in Wonderland, must admit to the subject's fear of and resistance to the jump down the rabbit hole into a world in which there can be a "grin without a cat," and so that we, like Alice, must concede that we have no control over success or failure, that we cannot optimistically abolish their difference, cannot rely solely on our autonomy. We are exposed to, and at the mercy of an Other, a stranger who has no name. And one fine day, this exposure will be final.

15 Carroll, 84.

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In the end, the most powerful theatrical moments are maybe even enactments of the "death of the subject." And perhaps this staging, the pinnacle of what theater can be, is exactly what Heiner Müller means by death in transformation, for him a core element of theater that unites audience and actors in their fear of this transformation – because it is, at least, a fear we can count on.

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Friedrich Nietzsche: The Twilight of the Idols

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One has to learn to see*, one has to learn to* think*, one has to learn to* speak *and* write*: the end in all three is a noble culture. – Learning to* see *– habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgment, to investigate and comprehend the individual case in all its aspects. This is the* first *preliminary schooling in spirituality: not to react immediately to a stimulus [...].*[16]

16 *Friedrich Nietzsche,* Twilight of the Idols, *76. Italics in the original.*

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Bodies on stage

On stage, the imagined world and the reflexive distance it offers do not exist. The stage demands that the actor give his all, not just his intellect. His entire phenomenal body is needed, from head to toe; no part may be missing – the whole of his anatomy is required, as well as the bodies of the other cast members and, of course, those of the audience.

Theater is an *ecstatic* art. It is the actor's profession to stick his neck out, to risk his palpable body in the act of performing in front of spectators/witnesses. There is no hiding place, no procrastinating, no rewind or fast forward, no technical means of correction after the fact. What happens now has happened – time bursts open – creates a gap – an empty space – through and throughout the actor – the event of acting ambushes the actor suddenly and ruthlessly – and the idea of man as a sovereign subject becomes an obstacle to playing, a conflict.

As soon as someone acts seriously, not just fooling around and flirting with the art of theater, they feel the full brunt of what it means to have dedicated themselves to acting as an event. The paradigm for this phenomenon is the premiere. Premieres create incredible tension, even for those who are good at hiding it. The body automatically sends out uncontrollable signals. The actor's stomach becomes queasy, his hands sweat, his mouth is dry, and he has to pace back and forth or leave quickly because his bladder is bursting, again. The signs may differ, but all actors are nervous, be they beginners or old hands. Everyone's heart beats faster before they go out on the open stage, knowing that they will soon be exposed to the eyes of the public. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. The actor's body is in a state of alarm. The heart beats faster, the breath quickens, and there is an outpouring of adrenaline like before a date you have been anticipating or dreading, one where you do not know what is going to happen, but you would not miss it for the world. The prospect of this moment of unassailability both exerts a pull and repels. Fear and desire shake hands.

The dilemma faced by the modern, enlightened actor stems from the subcutaneous malignant paradox described above. The act of acting is per se in contradiction to the modern idea of the self, while it simultaneously and automatically draws from this archived idea of the self. This forces the actor into a peculiar physical state of passion. He cannot

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shed the skin of modernity; he is not a reptile. But at the same time, the creative event of acting insists on the porosity of his skin; it must be torn open ecstatically, become permeable.

In the limelight of the stage, with no cloak of invisibility at hand, "naked" – no script in hand, no rostrum to hide behind, without the shield of scientific neutrality and with the pressure of performative quality – the traditional master–slave relationship of corporeality and intellect is instantly reversed.[17] The play can no longer be delivered from the spirits it has called. The body has been turned on; it surges, begins to duplicate itself – and there is no wise sorcerer in sight. He has vanished from the story. The body can only throw its own weight around; the body itself matters and acts on its own authority.[18] Usually a slave, a lowly apprentice, the body now takes over the controls. It has no shame and it has low standards. For example, it may act like a lump of clay. No matter how nicely it is talked to, despite all the cajoling, it may remain clumsy and wooden. Suddenly, novice actors have not two, but four arms and legs. *What do I do with my hands?* Everything becomes a problem. *They're suddenly dangling so weirdly like they don't belong to me, alien.* Just standing there without immediately putting his hands into his pockets – a favorite gesture of male novice actors – just standing there without looking like he has been bolted to the ground and without bolting, going to stand somewhere else because he just cannot bear it and feels like he has to do something; just standing can become the most difficult of tasks. It may sound hackneyed, but to be on stage, exposed to the eyes of others, and to "believably" act some daily task naturally, not cramped, not stiff, without clichés – simply but focused – is a higher art than is commonly believed. Actors experience the paradoxical phenomenon that a dominant will, the usual instrument of autonomous action, is counterproductive to engaging acting. The will gets in the way, literally. It initiates a process of self-observation that censors breathing and imagination. It is the critic who gives grades, the superego that appraises, argues, judges, and passes out sentences. Blocks are preprogrammed, innocence lost. At the same time, the actor depends upon his will. He needs it. Without it he cannot

17 On the transvaluation of the ideal body–mind relationship in Nietzsche's philosophy, see Volker Gerhardt, "Die 'große Vernunft' des Leibes. Ein Versuch über Zarathustras vierte Rede," in idem (ed.), Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2000), 123–163.

18 On the weight of the body, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*.

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act, cannot perform a single action. Even if he is *only* walking, he needs to know *why* he is walking and *where to*, or his walk has no destination or reason because he *wants* to express that this act of walking has no destination and no reason. Without willful acts, without intention, no play can be performed, much less repeated. Even in a happening, a happening is what is supposed to happen and its elements are all the playthings of the actor's intention.

Innocence of becoming

Simultaneous dependency on the effectiveness of and on the absence of the will is a paradoxical problem no intellect can solve. It throws the actor into a state of contradiction. The greatest contradiction is the fact that his regulatory reason, his *ratio*, cannot control his will and must make space for capricious fabulation. Without the power of imagination, without creative inventiveness – which, diametrically opposed to conceptual reason, never has an inkling of its "results" – there can be no artistic work.

But it is easier to write or read about this late modern collapse than to put it *into action* oneself. This is the apex, the raw nerve, of the art of acting. The highest demands are made of the professional actor – impossible for a lay actor – by the paradox present in every production. Every evening, in opposition to the mythology of modernity, he must surrender to the innocence of becoming.[19] Again and again he must willfully step into the voltage field of opposed poles, the conflicting powers of this innocence of becoming. The ability to meet this challenge is the actor's know-how (*techne)*. It is a long way to the intentionless intention[20] of acting on stage.

19 "What alone can *our* teaching be – That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*" (the nonsensical idea; last rejected here was propounded as 'intelligible freedom' by Kant, and perhaps also by Plato before him). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 65. Italics in the original.

20 For Immanuel Kant, pleasure, which determines taste, is completely uninteresting, a purposeless purposiveness. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (ed.) and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89f.

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But if you are only watching from below, it is difficult to understand the problems that arise. When an actor fails, you ask yourself *what's their problem up there on stage, it can't be that difficult*. When he is triumphant, you feel vindicated, because it looks so easy, so playfully easy. *Learning all those lines by heart, that's difficult! But walking, standing, sitting down at the right moment?*

There is an image that is quite popular among theater people for the art of innocence: the way a stagehand strolls across the stage. Nothing else happens, nothing more exciting. He just walks – and all eyes are suddenly upon him. Not because he has disrupted the rehearsal and everyone automatically looks to see who is bothering them and waits impatiently until he is finally backstage again. No, it is that there is something simply riveting about the way he does it, the way he just walks. *I can do that too*, you might think. *Anyone can do that. Walking, simply walking. We've all been walking since we were toddlers.* But the innocence of the layperson, who does not even realize he is being watched, is easily lost when for whatever reason he is required to play. Very easily. You only need to ask the layperson to *repeat* his perfect, suggestive stroll in the same way. Already you have brought him down to reality, mixed with astonishment at the fact that it really is not as easy as it looks. Because just strolling across stage as if you were that stagehand and also making all eyes fall on you curiously, this *innocence of the artist* must be ranked higher. Many requirements must be met by the *experts in being* on stage.

"Being on stage," as a performative art, cannot be achieved by systematically replacing professional actors with laypeople. Theater as a physical event, when it works, is high art and nothing to do with the expert hermetics often attributed to the professional actor. Acting is an act of extreme vulnerability and fragility. It is not that laypeople cannot exhibit these qualities, but rather that the qualities of laypeople and artists are not interchangeable. They should not be played off against each other. Neither resentment nor trendiness should have the last word, but instead curiosity about the diversity of aesthetic forms.

The crux of the problem – as regards professional acting – resides in the personal, conscious participation in walking, standing, talking, and so on. There is no action without an actor. Walking, standing, talking, and so forth cannot be done without some-body who walks, who stands, who talks. The infinitive is indeterminate, all action is abstract and

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meaningless when no-body is doing it. Without players, there is no play; physical presence is the fundamental element of theater. The stage needs people who walk, talk, and stand. Again, it requires flesh-and-blood actors from head to toe – and this two-sided, unrelinquishable condition is the root of all problems in acting.

It is not a pleasant feeling when the weight of your body, your body's matter, matters so much, when your body is suddenly confronted with its own intractability. Were you not done with that after puberty? Not only do the demands of acting and the gaze of the Others make your body self-conscious, make it suddenly feel like a block of wood, but the body itself also begins to act out its own particular blockades, the weak points that everyone likes to hide from themselves. It is embarrassing how much the body reveals. It tells intimate secrets the actor would prefer to keep hidden. What is more, contrary to the actor's intentions, it reproduces all sorts of clichés, all sorts of conventional, normed behavior he did not know, or would have denied, he carried in himself. It is terrible to watch yourself literally embodying individual and historical conditioning that you thought you had overcome, were sure you were free of. It is terrible that is just *happens,* although you know better. The body's memory just automatically acts and reacts the way men and women just are, the way they simply act and react.[21] This is not to say that theater does not work with the idiosyncrasies of the individual actors, with their differences, their contradictions, and their resistance. Of course it draws on the quirks and characteristics of people and thus works with the pleasure and critique of stereotypes and clichés. But in *this* interpretation of the actor's art, they do not stem from the exposition of a private sphere that cannot be invaded, but from a manner of playing. The actor is not, as it were, "authentically" presenting his own "empirical data." Acting in the sense of *poiesis* is dedicated to the open future. It does not only document the reality it portrays, it does not only mirror – in pain and joy – the past and present that has marked the person in his or her lifetime.

21 On the construction of gender norms, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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Language and speaking

One of the characters in Peter Handke's *Voyage to the Sonorous Land or The Art of Asking* is named Parzifal. Parzifal cannot stand being questioned. He reacts aggressively to each question. Otherwise he has no words; he is silent. Only once, listening to a story about death, does he slowly begin to stutter and speak. But while speaking he is overcome, as if he had known, by a new frenzy. He is overtaken by a compulsion to speak. Phrase after phrase leaves his mouth; he cannot stop the flow. Fragments of prayers, advertisements, headlines, lines from songs, his speaking transforms into a ceaseless wave of meaningless words. It is as if he had been cursed, caught in a modern Tatarus. When he finally stops, exhausted, the conversation apparently continues in his head, a torture that again makes him frantic. Not until much later, almost at the end of the journey, is Parzifal saved from the heap of meaningless letters. He can suddenly listen. Speech comes to him, alien and familiar. He slowly constructs new words, letter for letter, discovering them as if for the first time. "Wind, Sky, Dust, Water."[22] The spoken is created through speaking. Parzifal can call it up so that when he says its name, it is there. Wide-eyed he speaks word by word by word.

The same irritating phenomenon that can be observed in movement on stage is observed in language. All acts associated with language that come to us so easily in our daily lives – speaking, hearing, answering, and even being silent – lose their naturalness. They are called into question, create surprisingly complex problems.

Debutant actors are confronted with the problem that their speech does not obey them. Above and beyond the question of function – the workings of the breathing and speaking apparatuses that must first be trained – they find that they cannot *speak*, that they cannot *hear*, that they are not able to *think* the text that they have learned. They speak without being involved in what they are saying at the moment in which they speak it, and as a result they do not really understand what they are saying. Because they are concentrating so much on themselves and on their acting, they tend to not really *listen* to what their partner is saying. He or she becomes a mere prompter. All their attention is focused on *it's*

22 Peter Handke, *Voyage to the Sonorous Land or The Art of Asking*, trans. Gitta Honegger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 61–62.

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my turn soon, my text is coming, now I need to speak. They are absorbed by their own action, by *how* to "do" it, *how* to "shape" the next sentence, the next word. *O no, that horrible word is coming, the worst sentence. How can I say it so it sounds right?* In this way, the actor manipulates, illustrates, and illuminates, but he doesn't listen, so he can't *answer*. No dialogue is born, no shared imagination; one person does not inspire the other. Listening and answering, the central acts of all creative collaboration, are neglected, passed over. They become missed opportunities.

One could say that in speaking, he forgets to listen to the text, to what he is *saying*, saying *to* another actor. The spoken text is actually nothing but an answer to what has been heard and answered within the text. For this reason, actors often fail because their approach to language is too instrumental. If they are too interested in forming the text and not primarily in understanding its meaning, the latter is lost to them and to the audience. It becomes intangible. Words become empty shells, decorative sentences that taste like cardboard and are unable to develop performative power. What is said begins to merge with overemotionalism, which may be interesting at first but soon becomes boring.

It is always the same. The sovereignty of the will, its dominance and concurrent wish to succeed hinders the act of acting. As regards his body and his speech, the actor cannot get around the hurdle of his profession: that his role is not only to act but also to be a medium. There is no way to solve this problem "reasonably." He owns neither his body nor his speech, even if both belong to him. Like his body, his speech does not let him use it as he will. It refuses to be manipulated. It does not obey him. If he tries to exploit his speech, to force it, to wring meaning out of it, it turns against him and refuses to surrender. It flees into arbitrariness, striking, but simple. The words sound as if they had been learned by rote; they become wooden, painted. They illustrate their meaning but remain empty, mere black-and-white print. Oratory. What is said becomes empty rhetoric and cliché, text that obfuscates meaning.

In Austria, the infamous repertoire of director Fritz Kortner is often repeated in rehearsals as a kind of shorthand for confronting these problems: "Don't say *disgust and loathing* like it's a Jewish company!" Or "Stop playing oak-birch!" Isn't Kortner's snappy commentary also an example of all speaking without thinking? And don't "weighty oaks" and "whispering birches" also contain all of theater's false tones?

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Of course, technical ability is important to felicitous speech and to speaking on stage. That is beyond a doubt, even if skill is losing its reputation. Without *techne*, without technical skills, without training, there would be no professional theater. An untrained voice that does not know about breathing and rhythm, that comes from the wrong place and does not project, will hardly be able to use its full facilities and will soon give up the ghost. When vocal cords are strained and overexploited, it hurts – both speaker and listener, whether because, for example, the actor's voice is in his throat and cannot resonate in his body, or because of the unthinking, inflationary use of language.

Two things are necessary at the same time – surrender to and respect for language. The actor must both give language itself center stage and at the same time dedicate his entire palpable body to language. He cannot own it or treat it with disrespect. In both cases it pulls away, lapses, remains bland, flat, without vigor, without flesh, without eventfulness. Speech and speaking will not be subjugated or held liable. They are very sensitive to being treated carelessly. The magical depths of theatrical speech and speaking are only plumbed in the word that the speaker sends out beyond himself into the fathomless profundity of the silent and invisible web of meanings that accompany it. This is the web every good actor spins, even in what he does not say, even in the unsayable. Only careful listening allows such speech to speak through the actor, not the other way round. It is speech that speaks.[23] No philosophical knowledge is needed to understand this, only experience. It is speech that, going through the actor – back and forth between presence and absence – strikes a chord. In the kairos of this speech, behind what is said there is a glimpse of its possible meaning and at the same time the impossibility of comprehension. "Wind, Sky, Dust, Water."

Digesting speech

To learn a text so that it can be repeated by heart means to hold it inside your body. To do so, it must be read, its words must be picked out, collected.[24] They must be brought in, committed to memory, scanned so to

23 On this, see Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

24 The first meaning in most etymological dictionaries for the Greek verb *legein,* the root of the word lecture, the action of reading, is to pick out, to select, to collect, to enumerate,

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speak, so that they can be repeated automatically. The text must be saved internally, so that it can be re-collected at will from this inner archive. The German phrase for "to learn by heart" is *auswendig lernen*, literally to learn by turning outward. Such learning turns both inward and outward. It is a process with two mutually reinforcing aspects that belong together.

Not until this process of incorporation is complete has the text been completely understood, not just by the intellect, but by the entire body. Incorporation of a text is a complex learning process that functions similarly to the digestive system.[25] It takes time. It is often misconceived as a mechanical act of repetition, tedious learning by rote as so many people remember doing at school.

But it is more than that. An actor needs to almost *eat* his text, and to do so with enjoyment, like a gourmet delicacy. He must chew slowly and thoroughly, and the more his appetite increases, the richer the text becomes. The nuances of flavor are only brought out by slow and repeated chewing. If in contrast an actor simply swallows his text quickly, or if he inhales it mechanically as quickly as possible, its quality is lost. It is understood only superficially. *Undigested.* Not until all of a text's elements have been broken down has it been processed completely. Only then can it be drawn from by an actor while playing, without effort, automatically and reliably. A text that has not been incorporated completely can disappear. In the heat of emotions it is forgotten. The actor's memory is a clean slate and his feelings have erased it. The actor draws a blank, as it is called. And even if he remembers his lines, the text is still only "hot air." The audience sees an excited actor, but does not really understand why. That is boring, and the audience soon loses interest. But if a text has been incorporated, remembered with the physical body, then affect, logic, and logos are joined and can be released to play at any time. The text can be repeated at will as if reinvented, as if it had just been found, giving pleasure to all. And it can be repeated not just once but again and again and again – without ever becoming rote or mechanical. And the more poetic a text it is, the richer it becomes through repetition, since more can be found and understood in it and thus played with all the more.

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and only its second meaning is to say, to speak, to tell, to declare, etc. The substantive is *logos*.

25 On mind or spirit as a question of nutrition and digestion, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo,* trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21f.

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Counterwords

When speech is released into a state of suspension between the audible and the inaudible, the heard and the unheard of, it releases additional energy – at least for a moment. In that moment, the force of a single cry is enough to turn deathly emptiness into hope, or hope into deathly emptiness. Lucille's scream in Georg Büchner's drama about the French Revolution is such an outcry.[26] Historically, it is the senseless rebellion of the human being who believes he can perhaps stop death at the last second after all. But no one hears him, neither man nor God, and everything continues as usual. The clocks tick, the bees buzz, time trickles away and takes life with it. Camille dies his bloody death on the scaffold, as do Danton and the others. No scream can prevent it. But there is a word that can turn it around. Paul Celan calls it the "counterword, it is the word that cuts the 'string,' the word that no longer bows down before 'the bystanders and old war-horses of history.'"[27] Lucille dares to speak this counterword. At the very end of the play, sitting on the steps to the guillotine, she cries out to one of the revolutionary guards, "Long live the King!" Are these the words of one who has been driven mad by her lover's murder? Celan reads it differently, as an act of liberation, a step with a direction.

The counterword the actor is able to speak, that does not bow to the bystanders and old warhorses of contemporary or ancient theater history, is *how* Lucille's cries cry out. *How*, the manner in which this scream is screamed, can be an act of liberation. In this scream, the actor risks the bareness of existence without calculating the effect, not showing off her virtuosity, not following a particular method. This does not mean she has no knowledge of effect, virtuosity ,and methods, but that is not all.

The *how* of such a scream can cut the strings on which the automaton, man the marionette, dangles and opens onto a world that is also there, namely, a world that has not yet completely finished with its past, but where the past can continue to be written and where the sanctity of all

26 Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, trans. Henry J. Schmidt, in Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt (eds.) *Georg Büchner. Complete Works and Letters* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1986), 123.

27 Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version, Drafts, Materials*, trans. Pierre Joris, Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (eds.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 193.

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possible futures has always already been violated and at the same time overtaken. This is the muse's view, the turn, the *breathturn* and the beauty of performative art.

It [beauty] steps forward namelessly as a secret: Its mysteries outline the "bareness of form." [...] It is part of, participates in, the uniqueness of the moment. For this reason it allows, beyond language, solely an imperative of showing: "look!" or "hear!"[28]

In light of the aesthetics of contemporary theater, again almost dogmatic in a perverse reversal, we can translate Lucille's cry "Long live the King!" as "Long live beauty!" This is not meant to conjure up some preserved yesteryear, to continue along Celan's lines. We are not paying homage to some ancien régime, but rather to a yet-to-come *régime de l'avenir*.

"Long live beauty" is a call to beauty that appears suddenly, a moment of extreme vulnerability and porosity. Beauty as a breathturn, attentive to the big affirmation.

Why do you want to be an actor?
Perhaps that is why.

The Other, the others

Theater needs counterparts, a face vis-à-vis. It needs the Other, the others. There is no theater without the presence of others. You need actors and audience. Theater is a shared art, based on shared corporeal presence, and is thus an art of the moment under the gaze of the Other.

Gazed-upon moments are always also risky moments. You can never know beforehand how they will be answered or what will come of them. If you open yourself to the gaze, you must surrender to a stranger, to an Other. That can have fatal consequences and trigger events you never would have thought of and cannot imagine beforehand. A momentary glance can change everything that has gone before – like Joan of Arc's look into the eyes of Lionel in Friedrich Schiller's *Maid of Orleans* – and

28 Dieter Mersch, "Schönheit oder die 'Blöße' der Form," in *Ereignis und Aura* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 127.

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inadvertently make you face the tragedy and riddle of non-identity into which it plunges you. It can also bring to light that which might otherwise have remained hidden and untouched in the dark, because it is confrontational, painful, and threatening.

The power of the gaze can cause calamities. It can objectify others, betray, curse, and cut. As the saying goes, a look can even kill. One involuntary gaze into the eyes of Medusa can turn you to stone, and fear of the evil eye is found in almost all cultures reaching back to the beginning of history.

Another momentary gaze is needed for interplay on stage. This is another desire altogether. Perhaps it has its roots in the "penetrating eyes" related to Dionysus,[29] which inspire and are the source of the bottomless reservoir of creativity. It is a gaze meant to challenge, not harm, others, not even by the distortions of idealizing. It is open to and unafraid of the future, and is therefore not a slave to the prejudices that dazzle and delude us and judge Others without seeing what they can do. Instead, it is fundamentally welcoming to the Other and wants to open all options for him, make all avenues possible. Such a gaze is fundamentally generous and passionate, willing to risk a love-gaze and trusting that it will be able to distinguish strange from stranger, so that it does not expose itself naively to the destructive Other. And if Medusa does stare back – something that has been known to happen even in the most beauteous temples of the muses – the gaze is averted in time or lets itself come to the test. For who, in the kairos of time, has exhibited more potency – Eros the matchmaker or the demon Negativity?

When the interplay goes well, Eros has a good chance. In the kairos of the moment, the gazes of *homo ludens* lock on stage in the shared eros of the creativity of the muses. And what kind of coupling would it be if one cut the other off in the name of his own pleasure and advantage? That would be a poor showing and not a felicitous act, even if one of the two, much acclaimed, believed himself to be the winner.

Victorious moments, gazed upon in theater and smiled upon by the muses, have another look to them. They are not self-centered nor do they know self-denial. Rather they are fed by the understanding that

29 Walter Otto, *Dionysus Myth and Cult*, trans. Walter Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 90.

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each experiences his own potency only in collaboration with others, that couplings bring forth life and that the quality of one is dependent upon the quality of the other. But dependency does not, as is often believed, revoke freedom. In creative interplay, dependency is a prerequisite for maximal freedom, for the freedom of play. Actors know, or at least intuit "that the true site of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself."[30]

"It is the originality of the relation which must be conquered" so that the play can be a success, a felicitous event. That is why the space surrounding actors' relationships is neither the ego of one nor the ego of the other, but their cusp, in between the two. It is the hyphen of the open moment that both separates and joins, like the fond gaze that enables both actors to transcend themselves in play(ing) without losing their own individuality. From the paradox of with-out me, a web is spun between them (Greek: hyphe-web, hyphen-together), held by the finest of threads, and when it works, "when the relation is original, then the stereotype is shaken, transcended, evacuated, and jealousy, for instance, has no more room in this relation without a site, without topos."[31] Response and responsibility meet.

When all senses are penetrated in this way, and one's very existence merges with others, doesn't it bring ethics and aesthetics in the closest proximity? Isn't one precondition of the art of ensemble acting a regard for the exposed defenselessness of the other(s) and respect for the face of the other?[32]

Through this connection, the actors break through, throw off the pretenses and prejudices their past has conditioned them to carry. Regarding one another, they give each other space, create a shared space, one through the other, for the unexpected, the unforeseeable, leading one another. This happens not only during rehearsal, when putting the play together, but also in every staging of the performance. Performative quality always necessitates drawing from the past and anticipating the

30 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2001), 35.

31 Ibid., 35–36.

32 Emmanuel Levinas, "Exteriority and the Face," section III in *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 187–253.

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future; it requires reliable memory, and an open playing ground, whether in the jungle or in the garden.

In terms of temporality, you could say that the event of acting always unifies past, present, and future.[33] Their fixed sequence is jumbled up in the kairos of time, becomes open, and is rejoined in each moment. The actors never stop wandering backward and forward with one another in a strange land, a no man's land, into the unknown. This unknown exerts a pull on all players who, in the sensate desire for growth, bend toward it and incorporate it. In their shared joy and in their shared fear they spend themselves and find themselves in the pathos of laughing and crying about exposing themselves so, knowing they are exposed together.

Post scriptum. Luckily, often enough the dilemma of exposure dissolves in the blink of an eye, in the spoken words. Actors wink at each other, and the prompt box of their mind sends sentences such as "I will show myself highly fed and lowly taught"[34] – by which all weight is thrown off and scampers away.

Affect versus thought

We need to return to the idea that thinking is the enemy of performative talent and that affect is the enemy of philosophical or scientific integrity. Why? Because preconceptions are tenacious and hard to exterminate. Borrowing from Nietzsche we can say they are as "ineradicable as the flea-beetle" and "live longest."[35] Of course, they are always playing games. They like to sneak in wherever they can, excrete their poison, let off steam. The advantage of this is clear. You yourself are not guilty, you have an excuse, a scapegoat. Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche shake hands with one another. They pronounced the correct diagnosis. *Ressentiment* and transference are the ruling powers, and we can only ever be relatively free of them: "*The spirit of revenge*, my friends, has so far been the subject of man's best reflection; and where there was suffering, one always wanted

33 On the ecstatic unity of temporality and the ordinary (vulgar) concept of time, see section IV of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

34 William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare* (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 264–289.

35 Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche,* 129.

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punishment too."[36] Vindictiveness is powerful and tenacious. It rips the potential out of life, and can poison it permanently.

But if we look more closely at *actors and feelings* and start with the common reproach that actors are guided by their emotions, do we not have to admit that the actor's typical weak spot is, in truth, affect? Aren't actors always a little bit *too* loud, a little bit *too* excited, a little bit *too* weak of will, *too* worried about the impression they make? Aren't they all *too* ready to ride the waves of their emotions? Aren't their feelings always jumping here and there, unfaithful and dangerously easy to seduce? Aren't there enough contemporary examples of this in political history? Aren't actors per se refugees of reason?

The actor has spirit, but little conscience of the spirit. Always he has faith in that with which he inspires the most faith – faith in himself. Tomorrow he has a new faith and the day after tomorrow a newer one. He has quick senses [...] and capricious moods.[37]

Or do we need to turn what we have said about the actor's disposition on its head and concede that the actor's occupation forces him to ride the waves of emotion? What else could he do? You cannot swim or act on dry land. Acting is overflowing, chaotic, passionate, peripheral and proliferative. Is there more? Not even Brecht could have worked with actor cut-outs. Only a philistine can therefore demand the following of an actor:

> First, the *collegium logicum*.
> There will your mind be drilled and braced,
> As if in Spanish boots 'twere laced,
> And thus to graver paces brought,
> 'Twill plod along the path of thought.[38]

Isn't Mephistopheles' mockery reminiscent of the way actors ridicule theory? Doesn't he go on to say, "gray are all theories, / And green alone

36 Ibid., 252.

37 Ibid., 164.

38 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I*, trans. Bayard Taylor (Renaissance Classics, 2012), 63–64. Italics in the original.

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Life's golden tree"?[39] Sitting in a musty study or going out and grabbing life by the horns – it is not really a hard choice. This comparison is illuminating. Book learning evokes the famulus Wagner from Goethe's *Faust,* a bone-dry, boring, bourgeois representative of reason. Not a very popular role. Immediately you think of the color gray. Already you have taken sides, and this time it is not the emotions that lose, but thinking. Yet Mephistopheles's mockery goes deeper. In his counsel to the student he is not mocking thinking as thinking per se, but a particular kind of thinking. He is ridiculing a manner of thought that abstracts from the physical, from the world of the senses, even if advice such as the following: "To lead the women, learn the special feeling! / Their everlasting aches and groans, / In thousand tones, / Have all one source, one mode of healing"[40] might cause the mouths of some of this ilk to water and their pants to secretly bulge. But didn't Eve and her apple bring all this sin and misery upon humankind?

Today, we can replace the rationalist image of thinking with an intellectualist[41] image that believes it can rigorously distinguish between the content and performance of the act. Intellectualist thinking establishes a hierarchy between speech and speaking. It insists on the purity of a true or false content independent of the situation, the context, the tonality, and the gesture inherent to a sentence. They play no role in creating meaning. The grammatical or pragmatic rules of language determine what is "true" and what is "false."

The famulus Wagner can breathe a sigh of relief.

Performative intelligence is intuitively opposed to this kind of theoretical thinking. It rightly senses that it is counterproductive in performative art. It curbs, restrains, and constrains creativity, even punishes it. Acting is not a logical mathematical problem that must add up to the sum of its parts. Its result cannot be calculated. It is sensuous, contradictory, performative, and ecstatic. It thus always also includes an incalculable, unpredictable moment, an increase of being. The result of a performance is not logical, but ontological. It cannot be summed up with

39 Ibid., 69.

40 Ibid., 68.

41 On the intellectualist image of language, see Sybille Krämer, *Sprache, Sprechakt, Kommunikation. Sprachtheoretische Positionen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001).

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arguments. Its character is more of an erotic nature. Desirable, coupled. Every performance is a copulation, a copula,[42] an *amour fou*.

But from the vantage point of the *collegium logicum* it is of course a threat, an aberration both parasitical and arbitrary. It is an epicenter of uselessness, and actors are the potential do-no-gooders; they are a luxury that productive members of society allow themselves. The principle of non-contradiction is ignored, the excluded middle forgotten. A is not A, but rather A plus n. The outcome is always wrong; miscalculations abound. Gaps appear, empty spaces, unexpected differences. This space of difference, this desired, hidden space of the incalculable, is the site of the treasure of the actor's performative art.

Now somebody lifts a finger admonishingly.

Is it the old doomsayer from before?

People are vindictive. Why not allow ourselves a small pleasure? How would the honorable famulus Wagner feel if he were on the receiving end of a droll speech such as that delivered by Mephistopheles to the student? Shocked, he would no doubt flee instantly into his lonesome room and pull the covers up over his head ...

But who knows?

The performative is always full of surprises.

Mephistopheles's clever play with the traveling student is full of surprising turns. It is a wonderful example of the art of performative speech, which is why it so confuses the poor boy. In the end he no longer knows what is up or down. The devil's learned words have turned him topsy-turvy. The most confusing thing is not even *what* Mephistopheles says, but *how* he says it. It is the way he uses words and concepts to underscore his arguments that the student finds absurd, objectionable, even indecent. And it is the way he stares, laughs at the wrong time, and reaches for the student. That sets off the student's internal alarm, but he does not know where the fire is. Mephistopheles's arguments and proofs take on one meaning and then another. They vacillate, oscillate, like a true chameleon. They attack with an adroit sticky tongue, and the student falls for it each time. But the most confusing thing is that despite all the back and forth, the words and sentences remain logical in and of themselves. And so consistent! But *their sound, their sound, and all the other trappings!*

42 F.W.J. Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 38.

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In the end, it is "like a dream" to the student.[43]

Can't we ourselves take a new turn here and "dream," even assert that within the event of acting, thinking and emotionality are intertwined in a fruitful intimate dynamic? And that this event is not about liberation from affect, but the cleansing of affect to reveal its thoroughly noble quality, its ennoblement.

But how exactly is this expressed in emotions? By regarding, by training regard for, others and their alterity. This slowly drains ressentiment of its poison. Face to face there can be no more objectification and no judgment. A gaze into the face of the Other and the response made has to do with respons-ibility. By sensitizing and training the senses in this way, the stage becomes the site of an ethics of responsivity, a site of experiencing and re-membering (anamneses) the importance of alterity. Preemptively.[44]

Would this not in the end be "like a dream" for us?

Thinking and acting

Both thinking and acting reject conformity and civility. It is useless to try to play one against the other. Neither takes well to being normed. And if they do subject themselves to social mores, they stop being playful and thoughtful; they stop going beyond themselves; they long no longer; they turn our minds to prisoners. Our intellect is tied up and enslaved. The "Spanish boots" have us under their heel. Thinking and playing are right where they want them: conformist, obedient, and ready to draw the right conclusions, just as Mephistopheles mockingly advises.

But this is the wrong track for acting and for thinking. Their path is different. Don't both need to give themselves up to pleasure in the event of playing, the event of thinking? Don't both want to go to the limits of their possibilities? Don't both want to challenge their times? Don't both dare to transcend their times? Aren't both obsessed with the unanswerable question of why something is something rather than nothing? Aren't their questions about the meaning of being human, the sense and senselessness of our existence, almost libidinous? Questions that point

43 Goethe, *Faust I*, 69.

44 See Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura*, 9–21.

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continuously toward absence; toward openness and emptiness; toward freedom.

All actors (no matter what their type) who care about more than just their own pleasure, who believe not only that they have a fantastic job (which they do) but also that they are dedicated to the pleasure of art, agree that they must dedicate themselves to this openness, this free space, this porosity.

Actors can be "soothplayers,"[45] because they create transparency. They are artists who can be "transparency personified"[46] in the limelight, so that at the end it is not they but "the audience who go home as actors – that is, confirmed in their own ways as players; that only in this transparency [actors] created could they realize that this is what they themselves embody."[47]

Emulating and mirroring the world is important and engaging. The historical gaze, the mimetic copy are very useful. The knowledge and ability we draw from them deliver elementary tools for both thinking and acting. But the *libido* of acting and thinking is hardly satisfied by looking into the mirror, by mirroring the splendor and ruin of our world. Doesn't the event of thinking and the event of acting – in which past, present and future come together felicitously – necessarily cause a fracture in every observation based on constative observation? It is a fracture of continuity – a promise of "another beginning" *within* the world, *within* art. Not that either the world to date or its art has ever fallen into that fissure, but the self-conceptions that ruled them have often done so.

When thinking and acting become an event, there is always a connection to the invisible, the inaudible, the not-thought. There is a trace of the above-named copula, the connection, the link – or perhaps the covenant, the yoke, but not the yoke of oppression. Thinking and acting have no interest in force, in taming, or in imprisoning. Neither do they want to placate, reassure, or gloss over. They want to be a thorn in the flesh, a thorn of attentiveness, penetrating the crust to make it permeable, to open eyes and ears and to rupture the skin. In the event of

45 Peter Handke, 13.

46 Ibid., 14.

47 Ibid.

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acting, as in the event of thinking, the body becomes porous, the skin a dissoluble boundary; an opening onto the exterior world. This does not have the calming effect of illusion; it packs a punch, it spares no one. The others also become porous, electrified, their lives lit up, turned upside down. A peripeteia of the body–mind (physio-logical) condition by re-membering the ecstasy of our existence.

In the fairy tale, Snow White is kissed awake in the kairos of time after a hundred-year sleep and many senseless deaths in the hedge of thorns.

Yes, maybe like that.

We are simply fools of the theater.

Repetition

Wouldn't it be much more useful to learn by heart the lessons life teaches us, repeating them again and again rather than falling in love with and running after some foolish, senseless ideal? Instead of hoping that you could "see the top of [your] head for once."[48] Would that help us? In the end we would only have wasted time uselessly and, like Büchner's hero Danton, be sad about our lives:

But time loses us. It's very boring, always putting on the shirt first and the pants over it and going to bed at night and crawling out again in the morning and always putting one foot before the other – there's no hope that it will ever be any different. It's very sad; and that millions have done it this way and millions will keep on doing it – and, above all, that we're made up of two halves which do the same thing so that everything happens twice – that's very sad.[49]

Nonsense! cry the loudspeakers of the happy market economy.

The power of repetition is fatal – for happiness and for unhappiness. It swings back and forth from compulsion and virtual potency, between compulsive repetition and future faculties, between stencils and

48 Georg Büchner, *Leonce and Lena,* trans. Henry J. Schmidt, in Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt (eds.), *Georg Büchner. Complete Works and Letters* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1986) 165.

49 Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, in *Georg Büchner. Complete Works and Letters,* 80.

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metamorphosis. From desired to damned, from loved to feared, it revels in its comedies and tragedies, its scandals and triumphs.

It is a key that is difficult to fit to the art of acting. In the artistic code of the theater, in contrast to our usual understanding, repetition does not mean always the same. You cannot duplicate a production. Acting in the theater is not a technical reproduction that can be played at the press of a button. It is not always the same film, even if the same play is produced and the same text is spoken. A production is not a closed circle, and actors do not clone themselves. That would quickly be boring. The play would have no air to breathe, the greatest effort would be for nothing, the words would not grow wings; rather, they would stick to the paper they were written on, remain dead, morphemic corpses. The plot would plod, a merely theoretical vessel. You might as well buy the theater program and just read it instead. A "mechanical" repetition squanders the most beautiful and difficult aspect of theater: the possibility it holds of eventfulness. In doing so it cheats the audience of live observation, which is probably, in our media-saturated world, what still draws people to the theater; assuming they are not satisfied with mere representation on stage and in the auditorium, but that their pleasure in theater is drawn from the endless openness of everything that lives.

Yet again, once more, one more time for the umpteenth time. These words also have a whiff of coercion and of compulsion that robs us of our freedom when they emerge all powerful from our subconscious. But theater has nothing to do with this, even if actors are sometimes plagued by a theatrical superego in the form of directors, managers, and critics. Unlike compulsive repetition, an actor's repetition is joyful, happy. It is not beyond, but within the pleasure principle.[50] It is the pleasurable site of creativity, the pool of regeneration.

Why?

Each performance is a repetition of the performance before it. Either way. Whatever it was, it was. When the lights go down, the curtain falls, the actors have taken their bow and returned to their dressing rooms, and the audience has gone to get their coats; the performance is over,

50 "But we come now to a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure." Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 18*. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), 20.

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finished, completed. But, and this is what's fantastic about theater, on the next night, the next performance date, it can be repeated and new life can be breathed into it at each repetition. It can be repotentialized.

What does that mean?

Each individual performance is saved in the actor's memory as a result of the rehearsal process – all directions, all the right and wrong turns, thoughts, feelings, texts, contexts, appearances, entrances, exits – the entire fabric of scenes and dialogues. They have been inscribed within him and memorized. He can draw from them and play them again and again, and each performance lays down another memory pathway, so that his archive continually becomes fuller and richer. But only if the actor risks what has been before and frees it can he again electrify it. Only if he time and again and once more risks opening his acting to the uncertainty of his movements does a performance take off. This act of creative repetition is what makes acting so electrifying. It is its aesthetic desire, for the actors and for the audience. It opens all involved to a temporal piece of art that defies common sense, the reason of the everyday. Or perhaps it opens them to the gift of the muses that allows the dawning of an era in which the law of chronology no longer holds. The actor looks to the remembered past. He brings it into the present word for word, situation for situation and at the same time sends it into the future word for word, situation for situation by taking all that has happened and again exposing it to the openness of the present. In this way, he secures the future of his acting. There is no closure, because it is reopened in every performance. The actor may be chained to the chronology of the plot and to a certain setting, but in the kairos of time – in the present, past, and future – he can again find, recognize, develop, and remember new and ever more complex meanings in the play and its performative form. He can make good on something he maybe owes the play. He can go back to what has been in time and make up for lapses after the fact.

For this reason the difference in each repeated performance is always also an act of freedom and of liberation, an act of regeneration.[51] He overturns the past and present because the future acts within him – always unique, always singular. For this reason it is not the same performance that is given each evening in each show with the same name, but each

51 Arno Böhler, "Nietzsche – Vom regenerativen Charakter des Gemüts," *psycho-logik 2, Existenz und Gefühl* (2007).

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performance keeps its initial character and each repetition is bound to transgress the boundary of what has once been this way or that. This is the struggle or favor of theater in the actor's art of repetition. His acting in the present must always be coupled to what has been and what will be, whether he succeeds or fails.

Discovering and reviving the gap inherent to the future breathes new life into *the act* of all action, all emotions, all thoughts, and all speech. Without this difference[52] it is impotent, and it has no animating aura. Only if the play is performed from the very gut of the actor's archive, only if it is played as if it has just been discovered and spoken for the first time do the actions within it acquire meaning – even that which cannot be explained and remains mysterious. Without this difference and without the corporeal commitment to this difference, the actor would be nothing but a marionette whose mechanics could at most be hidden by the telescope of representation.[53]

By initializing and preserving this immanent difference in every repetition, the actor repotentializes his performance.[54] It becomes pneumatic. This is how he can escape the drudgery of doing one and the same thing each night and breathe new life into the play without it remaining one and the same, and also without willfully breaking with the performance that was worked upon and that the company agreed upon. In *triggering difference*, a play and its text begin to live, to speak; they begin to speak to the audience. The words take on physicality. They develop intensity as a material quality. They are charged and penetrate hearts, loins, and minds to spin their sensuous net of meanings and connections. Each word is just the tip of an iceberg. All actions are only what is visible of much more complex interconnections that reach into what is absent, missing, and incongruous.

Such a flowing repetition, and that which can be seen in it, can get you hooked, can hang its barbs onto the most inaccessible reaches of your subconscious.

Is this art not yet another reason to want to become an actor?

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52 For a concept of thought that matches this, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Athlone Press, 1994).

53 Hoffmann, *The Sandman*.

54 Böhler, *Singularitäten*, 165–183.

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Figure 6.1 *One of eight Dionysus masks made for the chorus in the lecture performance* Nach(t) der Tragödie *(After/The Night of the Tragedy). Courtesy of GRENZ_film, böhler&granzer, 2010. Mask designed and created by Elisabeth Binder-Neurue.*

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Heiner Müller: I am a land surveyor

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One could say that the basic element of theater, and of drama too, is transformation, and that death is the last transformation. The only thing common to everyone in the audience, that can make an audience one, is the fear of death, everyone has it … and the effect of theater rests on this only commonality. The foundation of theater is therefore always a symbolic death.[55]

55 *Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller,* Ich bin ein Landvermesser, *176.*

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Jean Paul: First Flower-Piece

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Frozen, dumb nothingness! Cold, eternal necessity! [...] How lonely is everyone in the wide charnel of the universe! [...] Alas! If every being is its own father and creator, why cannot it also be its own destroying angel? [...] Look down into the abyss over which clouds of ashes are floating by. Fogs full of worlds arise out of the sea of death. The future is a rising vapour, the present a falling one. [...] And after death [...] when the man of sorrows stretches his sore wounded back upon the earth to slumber towards a lovelier morning [...] no morning cometh.[56]

56 *Jean Paul,* Flower, Fruit and Thorn-Pieces, *trans. Alexander Ewing (London: George Bell, 1892), 280–281.*

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