

The Essay on Stage: Singularity and Performativity

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This article takes a closer look at the phenomena of the “theatrical essay” or “essay on stage” as an example of a dynamic tour de force of singularity and plurality (Jean-Luc Nancy) and the performative autopoietic feedback loop (Erica Fischer-Lichte) between actors and spectators. It applies the concepts of singular plurality and the aesthetic of performativity to selected contemporary stage phenomena.

Keywords: theatre / aesthetics / essay on stage / performativity / singularity / feedback loop

Towards a definition of the term

This paper outlines some basic characteristics of a particular genre within performing arts practice; namely, the “essay on stage” (or theatrical essay or theorized performance). Taking into consideration some examples of the contemporary performing arts, I take a closer look at this phenomenon with its two main specific features:

1. The dynamic tour de force of singularity and plurality, the incarnation of the fact that there is no being without “being-with,” that “I” does not come before “we” (i.e., *Dasein* does not precede *Mitsein*), and that there is no existence without co-existence (Jean-Luc Nancy).

2. The performative autopoietic feedback loop between actors and spectators, the event of the performance that provokes and integrates emergence, and thus blurs distinctions between artist and audience, body and mind, art and life (Erika Fischer-Lichte).

Before looking at some examples, let me try to be a bit more precise about what is considered an essay on stage. The essay is a specific genre that usually takes unusual forms. Its French meaning, *essai*, connotes tentativeness and experimentation; this understanding of the genre has been lost in most translations. In his illuminating and informative book *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, Graham Good states that the initial impulse of the essay was away from genre altogether, in the direction of formlessness (1).

In other words: one can consider the essay to be a form of expression within a given literary system that reveals the limits of that system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary and therefore constantly crossing over those borders within what Lotman would call the semiosphere of literature or the performing arts.

In accordance with this definition of the essay as a form of literature, it can be assumed that a theatrical essay or an essay on stage belongs to the tradition of the borders crossing experimental theatrical and performance-art pieces conceptualized in the twentieth century by artists such as Gordon Craig, Antonin Artaud, the historical avant-garde (Meyerhold, futurist synthetic theater), neo-avant-garde theater, and so on. Or, more precisely: one can call the essay on stage any performance practice that (like the essay according to Good) makes “a claim to truth, but not permanent truth. Its truths are particular, of the here and now. Nothing is carried over” (Good 9).

The theatrical essay – as indeed any genuinely original work – therefore produces particular truths and also reveals the limits of an artistic genre. It is far from a stable category and it establishes its inventiveness and singularity by operating at the unstable limits of the theatrical and by reinventing the category of theatrical itself. In the words of Derek Attridge: “To succeed in writing a work that is genuinely original, and does more than extend existing norms, is to introduce into the cultural matrix a germ, a foreign body that cannot be accounted for by its existing codes and practices” (55, 56).

Attridge’s concept of artistic practice as something that introduces a germ into the cultural matrix seems to come close to what Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Being Singular Plural* sees as a part of “a wholly different thinking of ‘art’” that “might [be] include[d] under the heading ‘critical art’” (55).

There are numerous possible examples of this “critical art” or introduction of a foreign body into the cultural matrix in a theatrical essay producing singularity. I take a closer look at some of them below.

Alice in “prison-land”

The first example is the 2009 performance *Alice in Wonderland: A Theatrical Essay on the End of a Civilization*, by Italian director Armando Punzo, staged in Volterra Prisons. Loosely based on Lewis Carroll’s masterwork, the text of the performance weaves in soliloquies from other authors, Shakespeare (predominantly *Hamlet*), and also Genet, Pinter, Chekhov, and Heiner Müller. The performers are convicted criminals

serving anywhere from five years to life in a maximum-security prison for crimes as varied as armed robbery and murder.

In this “tragedy of power,” the characters try to break free of the roles imposed on them by their playwrights, reciting, reading, and literally eating and vomiting Shakespeare, Carroll, and Genet, mixing their words with those of Carmelo Bene, Chekhov, and other authors. Alice, lost in this “prison-land” of language, is a child actress in turquoise, the only woman, the only silent character in this dramatic pit, acting secretly, sometimes dragging a spectator’s hand, pushing him on the run from room to room.

Her male counterpart Hamlet has infected the characters of Wonderland with his craziness; they keep changing their roles, entrusting them with their tortures and their obsessions. Alice is in a labyrinth, Carroll disappears, and our heads are beneath our feet; we now wrap those big white sheets first written by the detainees in the black-and-white words of Hamlet, Ophelia, Polonius, Gertrude, and all the other ghosts. There are many voices and many forms: the actors are men dressed as women dressed as the Mad Hatter, from Hamlet to Ophelia, a black whore in pink boots with red paint.

We have entered into the domain of Artaud’s theater of cruelty, into his statement: “If theatre wants to find itself needed once more, it must present everything in love, crime, war and madness. ... Everyday love, personal ambition and daily worries are worthless except in relation to the kind of awful lyricism that exists in those Myths to which the great mass of men have consented” (*The Theatre* 85).

The audience is a witness to the tremendous “flames” or “luminescent suns,” as Artaud called them, which man discharges during the course of a theatrical performance and which he later transforms in his fantasy into symbols and then into a work of art. Like Artaud, Armando Punzo believes that theater can perform a specific act of embodied transgression, within which the body that is becoming serves as a site for restructuring cultural belief systems. Punzo pioneers his essay on stage as a practice that begins through taking the body as a site of potential disorganization and then becomes a performance technique that instigates collective cultural subversions. For Punzo, the practice of dismantling cruelty creates a lucid body: a body open to possibility and change.

This version of *Alice in Prison-Land* is reminiscent of another *Alice in Wonderland*, a different kind of theatrical essay in post-socialist political circumstances by the Slovenian theater director Vito Taufer. Staged in 1986 at the Mladinsko Theater, this example of theater of images (Marranca) had an immense impact on Slovenian and Yugoslav theater of the 1990s. This theatrical essay was constructed in a form in which the tableau was

a central unit in performance composition. From broken and, in themselves, decentralized pieces, an image was built that continuously emitted a dispersed beam of heterogeneous ideas.

In his essay on stage, Taufer deconstructed Carroll's nonsense in a dialogue with Artaud, reading the two authors simultaneously along with the history of theater. He translated Carroll and drama by creating (to paraphrase Deleuze, referring to Artaud) "a sliding and even a creative, central collapse, causing us to be in another world and in an entirely different language" (Deleuze 96).

In Alice's journey across the space and time planes of the performance, the montage of virtual spaces gives rise to a poetic sphere of connotations. One witnesses a simultaneous double shift from the dramatic into the postdramatic on the one hand, and from political into post-political theater on the other. In the words of Derek Attridge, Taufer does more than extend existing norms: He introduces "into the cultural matrix a germ, a foreign body that cannot be accounted for by its existing codes and practices" (55, 56).

The subversive reading of the avant-gardes

As a third example of singularity and the theatrical essay, I take Matjaž Berger's *inscenation* for the official celebration the fifth anniversary of Slovenia's independence in 1995 presented on Republic Square in front of the Slovenian Parliament. The French philosopher Alain Badiou would most likely define this case as a kind of theatrical essay producing "a singular regime of thought" that "is irreducible to philosophy" (Badiou *Handbook*, 9).

Entitled *KONS 5, 5-letnica osamosvojitve Republike Slovenije* (KONS 5: Five Years of Slovenian Independence), the title of this essay on a huge square serving as a stage quotes a poem by Srečko Kosovel, a Slovenian constructivist poet of the 1920s. Performed with actors, musicians, athletes, members of the Slovenian armed forces, and others, it was a deconstructive reading of the Slovenian historical avant-garde, the three poems by Srečko Kosovel, the poem "Električna žaga" (Electric Saw) by Anton Podbevšek, another avant-garde poet of the 1920s, and a poem by their contemporary Vladimir Bartol together with an eclectic reading of avant-garde large-scale open-air artistic events.

In his deconstructive reading of the past, Berger also included two avant-garde works of art:

- Nathan Altman's celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917 in St. Petersburg with its decoration of the central

obelisk of the great square in front of the Winter Palace with huge futurist abstract paintings; and

- Leni Riefenstahl's films *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1935) and *Olympia* (Olympiad, 1938).

In addition to this, *KONS 5* also juxtaposed inserts from Slovenian films with a flyover by Slovenian military aircraft, ballet inserts with parachute descents, a Slovenian military review, and an actors' review in American classic cars. With its machinery of army, ballet dancers, athletes, and other artists, the entire celebration echoed and re-appropriated Soviet revolutionary performances, such as the futurist mass demonstration and the 1920 spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace* with an army battalion and more than 8,000 citizens in the re-enactment of the event.

Thus *KONS 5* met most of the "standards" of the form of the essay on stage: it revealed the limits of an artistic genre, it was far from a stable category, and it established its inventiveness and singularity by operating at the unstable limits of the theatrical and by reinventing the category of the theatrical itself.

Although the performance was "untheological" enough in its structure, the political discussion about it was predominantly not launched by its postmodern eclectic structure of sliding signifiers, but by the very fact that its title quoted Kosovel's avant-garde poem. Although the performance used the poem as a kind of *in absentia* – just as part of its title – it provoked vivid political discussion due to the following lines of *KONS 5* (translated by David Brooks):

Dung is gold
and gold is dung.
Both = 0
 $0 = \infty$
 $\infty = 0$
 $AB <$
1, 2, 3.
Whoever has no soul
doesn't need gold.
Whoever has a soul
doesn't need dung.
EE-AW (Brooks)

In the words of Erika Fischer-Lichte: the artistic event created a specific and very intense performative autopoietic feedback loop between actors and spectators, the event of the performance that provokes and integrates emergence and thus blurs distinctions between artist and audience, body and mind, art and life. The fact that the performance provoked

emergence and blurred distinctions between art and life was clearly seen in the reaction of some politicians: the Slovenian conservative parties' representatives considered the performance to be an offence to the newly established independent Slovenia and its five years of parliamentary democracy, and they boycotted the event.

Berger's theatrical essay, a performance as something that is "evental" (i.e., singular), thus paradoxically produced strong political reactions as though it were a political statement and not an artistic event with its components (to use the words of Alain Badiou once more) that, taken separately, are not capable of producing theatrical ideas or even a text. The politicians did not want to understand that "the idea arises in and by the performance, through the act of theatrical representation. The idea is irreducibly theatrical and does not preexist before its arrival 'on stage'" (Badiou, *Handbook* 72).

The avant-garde – which, as Lev Kreft points it out, "had moved to the Institution of Art" (i.e., galleries of modern art), and had been thereby "reduced to emptied aesthetic pleasure, in which all its politicity is lost" (13) – has thus through the deconstructive and singular tactics of reading the avant-garde poem (to a certain extent) regained its political impact and indirectly led to a political crisis that commented on the current post-socialist condition.

Post-communist flags

The fact that a specific form of postmodern politicized theatrical essay flourished in most of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, including East Germany, can also be clearly perceived in the work of the German choreographer Jo Fabian. His "theatrical essays" in a form of dance theater pieces of the 1980s created what Jens Giersdorf calls "a truly post-modern theatre in East Germany, a country that hadn't worked through all the issues of modernity at that time" (Giersdorf 3). With their attention to the structure, meaning, and elements of the theater medium, his productions borrowed eclectically from Artaud, absurd theater, surrealist paintings, political theater of the 1920s and 1930s, Bauhaus mechanical ballets, the American avant-garde theater of images, and the tradition of German *Tanztheater*; namely, Pina Bausch and Johann Kresnik.

Jo Fabian's theater also appropriated some of Brecht's epic theater theories while mapping the late communist and post-socialist condition and striking against socialist theater in the form of an essay on stage. Thus his postmodern usage of Brecht resulted in demystification by interactively

depicting the basic elements that comprised a confused social and historical situation. His 1993 production *Whisky & Flags*, for example, restaged in 2003 and planned to be restaged each ten years, has the form of an essay on stage and uses a sign language close to Wilson's "theater of images" to deal with the political theme of German reunification and its consequences.

Fabian's essayistic fictional performance depicts East German history while paralleling two historical periods: Nazi Germany and German reunification with consequences for the East Germans through a specific postmodern problematization of the medium and institution of theater. This problematization does not lead to a Brechtian condition of arousal of the observer's capacity for action, but to the deconstruction of theatrical and social sign systems. His performance is a reaction to utopianism. It perfectly suits Mikhail N. Epstein's idea of postmodernism and its approach to history: "Postmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in so doing, gave it the attributes of the future indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of possibilities" (cited in Erjavec 20).

In Fabian's *Whisky & Flags* – to paraphrase Epstein's analysis of contemporary Russian culture – the East German communist future has become a thing of the past, whereas the Second World War Nazi past and bourgeois German period before the war approaches us in a decontextualized and recontextualized condition from the direction where we had expected to meet the future.

Slovenian National Theater

Another form of politically engaged essay on stage can be clearly identified in the very unusual theater production *Slovensko narodno gledališče* (Slovenian National Theater),¹ the fourth performance piece in a series entitled *Program!*² by Slovenian artist Janez Janša, which deals with questions of the system of contemporary performing arts and its position in the wider societal and historical context. The production's program carries the following sentence:

Slovenian National Theater reconstructs actual historical events: political demonstrations of 2006 that took place in certain Slovenian villages. The story of the encounter between two different communities, which had enormous media coverage, is staged through the theatrical forms of the ancient chorus and radio play, as well as a live television and radio broadcast. The combination of classical theatrical form and contemporary media broadcasts creates a moving spectacle and opens up anew the question of tragedy in today's world. (*Slovensko narodno gledališče*)

One could say that *Slovensko narodno gledališče*, this theater performance concerned with the sonic dimensions of political public rage thus combines two different types of theatrical tactics that belong to two historical territories on the map of Eurocentric theater:

- A classical theatrical form in which actors perform as a chorus commenting on the action as in ancient or classical tragedy; and
- A contemporary form of media broadcast in which actors perform the exact sound recordings of television reports on events in the village of Ambrus in 2006, while simultaneously listening to them on headphones.

As such, it embodies Artaud's notion of theater as a plague. In its hybrid theatrical form (also identified as a specific feature of the theatrical essay), it constantly addresses the audience and reconstructs actual historical events: political demonstrations of 2006 that took place in certain villages in Slovenia. In its essay-like form it reconstructs the story of two communities: the larger group of rural Slovenians and the minority group of Roma people living on the outskirts of the rural community. This was a major media event and thus the reconstruction is staged in the manner of Auslander's junction of live performance and the mediatized spectacle, performativity, and reproduction. This junction (in connection with the plot and the subject, which are directly political because they are bound to the media of television and radio) produces discomfort in the audience. It demands that they formulate a viewpoint towards the action unfolding on stage and respond to it, while being aware of their own powerlessness and deceptive participation, which is assured and at the same time imposed by the mediatized television event.

One witnesses a unique process of autopoietic feedback loops (Erika Fischer-Lichte), a temporary community formed by performers and the audience that launches a specific theater of revolt against what Auslander defines with *syntagms* such as "live presence has depreciated in our mediatized culture" and "a fusion that we see as taking place within a digital environment that incorporates the live elements as part of its raw material ... [in] the cultural dominant" (Auslander, *Liveness* 38).

The performance stresses the fact in an essay-like manner that we live in the firmament created by the prevalence of the mediatized culture, and yet it deliberately resorts to performative culture, to the restorative processes of ritualistic theater in which the actual performative event – the confrontation of the audience with the village of Ambrus, and the resulting consequences – takes place. The audience is thus forced to face the unavoidable self-reflection and images of themselves, their role in (not) taking responsibility for what happened in Slovenia about a year ago.

Janez Janša's piece *Slovensko narodno gledališče* thus achieves a withdrawal of the aesthetic aspect of the theatrical event in favor of current political

issues. Within this, as critic Blaž Lukan points out, an equally acute crisis of ethics is exposed:

The event of the Slovenian nation, directed by Janez Janša (an intriguing collision!), is therefore “the case of the village of Ambrus,” linked with, as we know, the exile, or rather, the deportation of the Roma Strojani family from that village and all the accompanying events that made for one of the darkest stains on post-independence Slovenia. ... Janez Janša stages the reconstruction of Ambrus in a kind of performative inversion by means of returning us to the actual event itself, or serving it to us as a temporal and spatial extraction from its original unfolding, and transcribes its media origin into a sonic performance piece, distributed amid four performers and a companion. However, the formal side of the (thoroughly professionally executed) event is of little importance. What carries greater significance is that, by reconstructing and transcribing the documentary material, Janša revives a fact that our political (and media) reality has suppressed to a great extent. Taking Ambrus out of a (partly dictated, partly spontaneous) amnesic political and media reality is thus the essential quality of this event that, despite not hiding its own performing or conceptual origins, inhabits the traumatic core of Slovenian political mythology. (Lukan 23)

Interlude

As seen from the examples discussed up to this point, the artists using a form of the theatrical essay see the art of today not purely as a work of art, but as a singular event that comes into being by means of interaction of performers and the viewers. They try to put the audience in a state of insecurity and discomfort. In their actions, the common oppositions of subject and object, of presence and representation, and of art and social reality disappear, whereas dichotomies appear to have evaporated. At the same time, the audience transforms and finds itself in a state that is alienated from everyday social norms. Following the logic of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s book *Aesthetic of the Performative*, the consequence of this is a destabilization of the perception of reality due to the liminality of an artistic event, and it may cause a re-orientation of the individual (which, let us not deceive ourselves, is only temporary).

Janez Janša and the other artists discussed thus count on the trigger for the change of the perception of reality and a simultaneous emergence and exposure of an abyss between the signifiers and the signified, which establishes the credibility of the language of art. At the same time, their projects generate an Auslander-like politics of performance that is “exposing processes of cultural control” (Auslander, *From Acting* 61).

Post-Brechtian measures taken

This also holds true for the last example of the theatrical essay I discuss: Sebastijan Horvat's staging of one of most controversial twentieth-century pieces for theater, Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstück* (learning play) titled *Die Maßnahme* (The Decision), also known in English as *The Measures Taken*. *Die Maßnahme* consists of eight sections in prose and unrhymed, irregular verse, with six major songs. It received its first theatrical production at the Great Theater (*Großes Schauspielhaus*) in Berlin, opening on 10 December 1930. The play was also produced in Moscow around 1934. Brecht and his family banned the play from public performance but, in fact, the Soviet government did not like the play and other governments banned it as well. Performances resumed in 1997 with Klaus Emmerich's historically rigorous staging at the Berliner Ensemble. The FBI translated the play in the 1940s, and titled it *The Disciplinary Measure*. The report described it as promoting "Communist World Revolution by violent means."

Also recently staged by the Slovenian theater director Sebastijan Horvat in 2008, this *Lehrstück* is another example (to use Alain Badiou's words from *Handbook of Inaesthetics*) of the assemblage of extremely disparate components, both material and ideal, whose only existence lies in the performance, in the act of theatrical representation.

As in other cases discussed, the components (a text, a place, some bodies, voices, costumes, lights, a public, etc.) in Horvat's essay on stage are gathered together in an event, the performance (representation), "whose repetition, night after night, does not in any sense hinder the fact that, each and every time, the performance is evental, that is, singular. ... None of the components taken separately is capable of producing theater-ideas, not even the text. The idea arises in and through the performance, through the act of theatrical representation. The idea is irreducibly theatrical and does not preexist before its arrival 'on stage'" (Badiou, *Handbook* 72).

Brecht's *Lehrstück* – this specific genre that, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, can easily belong to what he labels "critical art" – reads in today's theater as an essay belonging to different traditions and genres with a high degree of crossings: from theater to ideology, from prose to poetry, drama, and vice versa. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek defines the piece as one in "the line of 'overorthodox' authors (from Pascal through Kleist and Kierkegaard to Brecht's learning plays) who subvert the ruling ideology by taking it more literally than it is ready to take itself." These works produce "the uneasy, disturbing effect on the reader" that resides "in the fact that they ... disclose the hidden cards of ideology they identify with ... and render them inoperative" (Žižek 77).

This “irreducibly theatrical idea” of the singularity of the theatrical event, in which the idea arises in and through the performance, is well embodied in Horvat’s staging of Brecht’s theatrical essay. In his project created in 2008, with the permanent dance group EKG, Horvat stages Brecht with post-Brechtian logic, on the elusive line between performing and not-performing, acting and non-acting, privacy and the role, the exchange of over-identification, and alienation, which evoke a feeling of uneasiness in the spectator. Brecht’s text is not spoken, but projected on the back wall. Language, not as speech, but as writing, talks about a collective organism of execution.

In a specific post-Brechtian procedure, Horvat and the performers go beyond and away from the text itself; for example, in the scene in which Turkish dancer İlkem Ulugün wears a blood-red dress, with “revolution” written on her forearm, is escorted by other dancers, and walks on the red carpet like a fashion model until her ecstatic showing of the body and corporeality gradates into hysteria. In this way, on the one hand Horvat deconstructs, rearranges, and puts on trial Brechtian political theater, his form of essay on stage. He reaches this by a specific formal principle, which originates in Bob Wilson’s procedure of friction between two systems of representation through which the performance operates: namely, visual and audible.

In his artistic procedure, Horvat adds to Wilson’s tension or confrontation of two spaces/times of performance (which are, incidentally, very close to Brecht’s epic theater) a third, kinetic (or, rather physical) dimension. In his theatrical essay image, voice and movement are no longer in hierarchical or at least predictable relations. This non-hierarchy triggers a particular politics and singularity of performance. While following the movement material that the dancers create, one reads the translated letters of Brecht’s *Die Maßnahme* as they slide by on the projection screen. The audience is a witness to a process in which the other, quite unimaginable disposition of cultural materials produces a singularity that can nevertheless be experienced only as a process of partial accommodation to norms.

Horvat is not trying to play/enact the text, but instead literally demonstrates it with a conveyor belt of letters following one another. He is not ignoring its historical and political weight, but at the same time he transfers it from the representational into the scopic (visual) field, with text being articulated and de-articulated in a different manner. In contrast to a common manner of directing, which submits gestures and images to the text, the “running” text and the images complement and comment on each other. This creates the singularity of an open structure, which

Umberto Eco named *opera aperta*, Barthes and Kristeva “inter-text,” and Baz Kershaw “over-layering.” They oppose each other as many contrasting and incompatible sign systems of a performance, and cultural codes of performers and viewers.

In the terminology of Derek Attridge, one is witnessing singularity, alterity, and inventiveness not as a property, but as an event, “the event of singularizing which takes place in reception,” “it is produced, not given in advance; and its emergence is also the beginning of its erosion, as it brings about the cultural changes, necessary to accommodate it” (64). The director thus approaches Brecht without epistemological debates, but with a great enough wish and need to decompose the elements of the medium of the theater and then construct them back together. He does so in order to establish a “privileged area, where theater speaks as it is” (Ubersfeld 39).

The staging of *Die Maßnahme* can be thus seen as another attempt by Horvat to bind different medias, to produce a singularity of theatrical essay, which Badiou describes as “the assemblage of extremely disparate components, both material and ideal, whose only existence lies in the performance, in the act of theatrical representation” (Badiou, *Handbook* 72).

In the terminology of Jean-Luc Nancy, one could say that in his theatrical essay Horvat establishes “singular plurality,” which refuses to start with the opposition of the same and the other, arguing instead for a primacy of relation, the “in-common” and the “with.” Using the terminology of Erika Fischer-Lichte and her aesthetic of performativity, one could maintain that Horvat is interested in the emergence of performance as an “art event” in its own right, of a specific autopoietic feedback loop produced within the event of the performance that deliberately makes changes in priority from “I” (the artist, the spectator in the singular) to “we” (the performers and spectators interchanging their traditional roles). If Brecht already crossed the borders between artistic and theoretical disciplines, Horvat is persuaded that theory should become a constituent part of the performance.

Art as a procedure of truth

One could also say that the theatrical essays discussed developed a specific autonomy. They detached themselves from ordinary or everyday or ideologically committed *language* through formation of a specific “counter-discourse.” Thus they negate the representative or signifying function of language. Like medieval madness (in the sense of Michel Foucault) they became a discourse that wants to return to its origins as the “truth” of the

world and deals with a specific subversive power. This subversive power lies in a singularity of the artistic event, in what Jean-Luc Nancy names a dynamic tour de force of singularity and plurality, the incarnation of the fact that there is no being without “being-with,” and that “I” does not come before “we.” They stress the fact that there is no existence without co-existence.

In addition, they achieve what Antonin Artaud (in the “First Manifesto of the Theater of Cruelty”) defined as the utopist power that a theater can obtain by presenting “everything in love, crime, war and madness.” They produce tremendous “flames” or “luminescent suns,” as Artaud called them, which man discharges either during the course of a theatrical performance or in moments of great stress (as during a plague), and are also the same ones that he later transforms in his fantasy into symbols and then into a work of art.

In this sense, the theatrical essay can be seen as one of the possible incarnations of Artaud’s strong belief that theater can perform a specific act of embodied transgression, within which the body-becoming serves as a site for restructuring cultural belief systems.

As seen in the examples explored here, it is far from Foucault’s thought that literature can be granted the utopian role of transcending those epistemic structures that determine how people think or even that they think. They nevertheless persist in the belief that art can be interpreted as a foil to the arbitrary changes that bring about a new economy of discourse. Like a dream, or perhaps more like a medieval madness, contemporary art is characterized as a discourse that wants to return to its origins as the “truth” of the world. To quote the metaphorical and somehow prophetic style of Artaud:

It may be true that the poison of theatre, when injected in the body of society, destroys it, as St. Augustine asserted, but it does so as a plague, a revenging scourge, a redeeming epidemic when credulous ages were convinced they saw God’s hand in it, while it was nothing more than a natural law applied, where all gestures were offset by another gesture, every action by a reaction. (Artaud, *Collected Works* 20)

In the examples of the essay on stage discussed here, a performative act on stage unites singular and plural, and textual and performative culture. It produces what Alain Badiou defines with the notion of art as a procedure of truth: art that is no longer a rival to philosophy and theory because it provides material *for* philosophy; it is no longer a supplement because it carries its own self-sufficient truth. In addition, following the thoughts of Derek Attridge, it establishes a singularity of the theatrical act, a performative artwork and its occurrence as a particular kind of *event*, a

“performance.” It is a performative event in which one experiences art less as objects than as events, and as events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same. It creates a singular event, the repetition of which, night after night, “does not in any sense hinder the fact that, each and every time, the performance is evental; that is, singular” (Badiou, *Handbook* 72). A singular event, in which – to use words of Jean-Luc Nancy – “what counts in art, what makes art art (and what makes humans the artists of the world, that is, those who expose the world to the world), is neither the ‘beautiful’ nor the ‘sublime’; it is neither ‘sensible manifestation’ nor the ‘putting into work of truth’”. Undoubtedly, it is all this, but in another way: it is access to the scattered origin in its very scattering; it is the plural touching of the singular origin” (Nancy 14).

In this sense, a specific form named the “essay on stage” or “theatrical essay” produces what Badiou names “a generic vacillation” in *Rhapsodie pour le theatre*: “The true theater makes of each performance, each actor’s every gesture, a generic vacillation in which differences with no basis might be risked. The spectator must decide whether to expose himself to this void, and share the infinite procedure. He is called, not to pleasure ..., but to thought” (Badiou, *Rhapsodie* 91–92).

NOTES

¹ *Slovenian National Theater*, A theater performance re-invoicing the sound dimensions of political public rage. Concept, directed by: Janez Janša. Cast: Aleksandra Balmazović, Dražen Dragojević, Janez Janša, Barbara Kukovec, Matjaž Pikalo. Opening night: 28 October 2007, Stara Mestna Elektrarna – Elektro Ljubljana, Ljubljana.

² For more information see: <http://www.maska.si/sl/produkcije/scenska/program/371/sng.html> (accessed 15 February 2008)

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Scenski esej kot singularnost in performativnost

Ključne besede: gledališče / gledališka estetika / gledališki esej / performativnost / singularnost / povratna zanka

Prispevek na podlagi izbranih primerov iz sodobnih uprizoritvenih praks spregovori o odrskem esejju kot dinamiki singularnosti in množstva, »Jaza«, ki nima nobene prioritete pred »mi«, eksistence subjekta, ki je po svojem bistvu vselej ko-eksistenca (Jean-Luc Nancy) ter performativni avtopoetični feedback zanki med izvajalci in občinstvom, dogodka-predstavi kot performativnem dejanju, ki provocira in integrira emergenco (Erika Fischer-Lichte). Avtor v njem poveže dva teoretska koncepta: Nancyjev ponovni premislek koncepta skupnosti, ki ne temelji na kakršnikoli individualni subjektivnosti, v kateri »biti« vselej pomeni »biti z«, ter estetiko performativnega Erike Fischer-Lichte, ki izhaja iz Austinovega pojma performativ ter ga vpeljuje v teorijo uprizoritvenih umetnosti. Tako ugotovi, da lahko tudi v primeru izbranih odrskih fenomenov (Armando Punzo, Vito Taufer, Matjaž Berger, Jo Fabian, Janez Janša, Sebastijan Horvat)

govorimo o posebni obliki uprizoritvenih praks kot esejistične pisave, za katero je značilno prestopanje meja med različnimi umetniškimi mediji, pri katerem prihaja do odsotnosti prioritete »jaza« (avtorja, izvajalca, gledalca) pred »mi« (izvajalcev in receptorjev, ki lahko tudi izmenjujejo svoje vloge), hkrati pa tudi do tega, da teorija postane konstitutivno okostje predstav (Miško Šuvaković). Tudi na odru in v avditoriju lahko torej pride do performativnega dejanja, združujočega singularnost in mnoštvo, tekstualno in performativno kulturo. Hkrati avtor pokaže, kako odrski eseji kot posebni sistemi reprezentacije proizvajajo to, kar Alain Badiou imenuje s pojmom mišljenje, ki ga ni mogoče misliti, ker v govorico zajame singularno prezenco čutnega, mišljenje torej, v katerem se vzpostavljajo singularne, umetnosti lastne resnice. Oziroma to, kar Derek Attridge ob tem, ko govori o singularnosti literature, poimenuje s pojmom pojavitev umetniškega dela kot posebne vrste »dogodka«, ne več toliko kot objektov ampak predvsem kot dogodkov in dogodkov, ki se lahko ponavljajo, ne da bi bili kadarkoli identični. Ali to, kar (prevedeno v logiko dogodkovnosti) Erika Fischer-Lichte razpozna kot neponovljivost, vsakič drugačnost in enkratnost uprizoritve.

Maj 2010