

Strange Encounters:  
Performance in the Anthropocene

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I confirm that all work presented in this dissertation is my own, and that all references to other sources have been cited accordingly.

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## —ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS—

Sometime in the past someone came up with the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to write a PhD for the nurturing of the latter is often only possible thanks to the labour, vision, and support of a large number of bodies with whom one shares one's journey. Nevertheless, when the work comes to an end, the one to whom the text is attributed—the author signed above—is by default left alone at the receiving end of all praise and criticism aimed at perfecting the work and directing it towards a life that is hopefully both “long and prosper,” as Dr Spock recommends.

In line with that, I would like to pay tribute to the bodies that, in one way or another, have been crucial to the conception, gestation and birth of this strange child of mine, one that would have never come to appear in its present form if it were not for them.

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—ABSTRACT—

The current ecological crisis is drawing Humankind's attention to the increasingly blurred divide between the once-stable realms of 'Nature' and 'Culture.' The coinage of the "Anthropocene," the name chosen to designate the new geological epoch marked by the material sedimentation of byproducts of the human impact on the Earth's ecosystems, calls into question modern ideals of human progress, freedom, and emancipation from 'Nature.' Within such a context whereby 'Nature' and 'Culture' are no longer so easily dissociated, traditional academic divisions between the Sciences and the Humanities are disturbed, and phenomena usually studied by the latter are increasingly being approached by the former (and vice-versa).

In the particular field of Performance Studies, the new ecological paradigm problematises the discipline's tendency to privilege human, i.e. 'cultural,' instances of performance. In doing so, it raises a few important questions: 1) "can there be performance without humans?" 2) "if so what will it look like?" and 3) "how will that affect the work of Performance Studies?"

This dissertation attempts to answer all three of those questions. By 'thinking big' and making use of a wide variety of bodies of knowledge, from philosophy to performance theory, from history of art to ecocriticism, and by reflecting on several different encounters between humans and humans, humans and nonhumans, and nonhumans and nonhumans, the thesis put forward here claims that performance is what allows all kinds of bodies to encounter one another despite remaining strangers to each other. In pushing performance beyond the human, in giving it a *broader than broad spectrum*, this dissertation claims performance theory to be an important interlocutor in contemporary debates beyond the Humanities/Sciences divide, and at a time of deep ecological urgencies.

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—AUTHOR’S NOTE—

An abridged version of Chapter One, “Modern(ist) Narcissism and the Shock of the Anthropocene,” appeared in *Identities: Journal of Politics, Gender, and Culture* 10, no. 1&2 (2013) under the title “Dancing to the Rhythm of a Geiger Counter: Modern(ist) Narcissism and the Anthropocenic Shock.”

A short version of the argument presented in Chapter Two, “Performance on the Anthropocenic Stage,” was published along with an earlier version of the Fugue, “Speaking in Tongues,” in *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies* 1 (2013) under the title “Ecology Without Nature, Theatre Without Culture: Towards an Object-Oriented Ontology of Performance.” An earlier version of the Fugue also appeared as “Staging the World: A Theatrics of Objects” in *Field Static*, edited by Devin King and Caroline Picard (Chicago: Holon Press, 2012).

An earlier version of the response to Steven Cohen’s piece *Chandelier*, which is included in Chapter Five, “Blind Dates: The Ecopolitics of Facing Strangers,” was published as “Of Lights, Flesh, Glitter, and Soil: Notes Towards a Complex Ecology of Live Art” in *Space (Re)Solutions: Interventions and Research in Visual Culture*, edited by Peter Mörtenbock and Helge Mooshammer (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011).

A huge thank you to all the editors and peer-reviewers for the invaluable feedback and words of encouragement.

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.  
—H.P. Lovecraft<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 139.

—PRELUDE—

**1978, Wuppertal, Germany.** A young and lost woman, her eyes closed, struggles to move freely in a darkened German *kaffeehaus*, her movement impaired by both the furniture she encounters on her way, and the walls that enclose her. Again and again she hits the tables and she falls; she stumbles on the empty chairs that oscillate between their role as signs of absence and their material presence as objects in space. Again and again the audience can hear the sound the walls, chairs, and tables make when hit, violently, by her moving body. This is Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*.



Fig. 1: Pina Bausch, *Café Müller*, 1978. Film still.

**1986, Chernobyl, Ukrainian SSR.** As a result of a complex set of causes that include flaws in design, one of four reactors at the local nuclear power plant explodes in the early hours of the 26th of April. As a consequence, a huge amount of radiation is released, amounting to at least 100 times the radiation of the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, leading the accident to be widely recognised as the biggest nuclear accident in History, and campaign groups such as Greenpeace to predict up to 93,000 extra cancer deaths as a result of it. This is the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster.

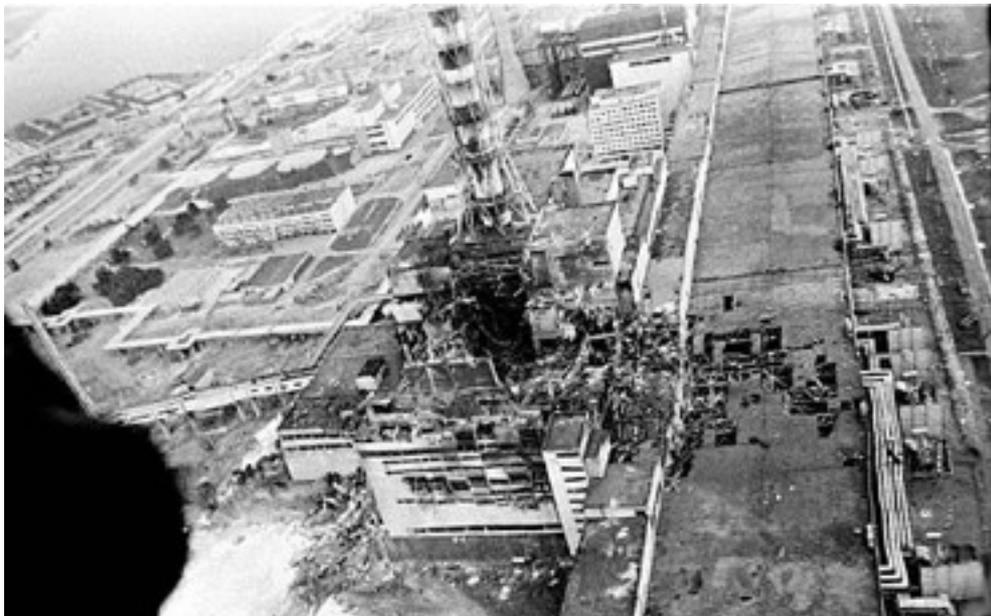


Fig. 2: Aerial view of the Chernobyl nuclear plant, 1986. Photo: Associated Press.

**1992, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.** Representatives of the governments of 172 nations meet for the first ever United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In an attempt to recognise the impact the continuing deterioration of ecosystems is having on the well-being of humankind, and to tackle its progression, the conference culminates with the publication of, amongst others, *Agenda 21*, a non-binding action plan for the implementation of sustainable development policies at local, national, and global levels. The document is then reaffirmed and modified at subsequent UN conferences. This is the Earth Summit.



Fig. 3: Dr. Zhelyn Zhelev, President of the Republic of Bulgaria, addresses the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992. Photo: UN Photo/Michos Tzovaras.

**1993, Venice, Italy.** A British filmmaker presents his very small audience at the Venice Film Festival with seventy-six minutes of flickering International Klein Blue projected on one of the screens at the Palazzo del Cinema. The projection is accompanied by ambient sounds and several voices narrating different episodes of the artist's daily battle with HIV and of his struggle with AIDS-related blindness. This is Derek Jarman's *Blue*.

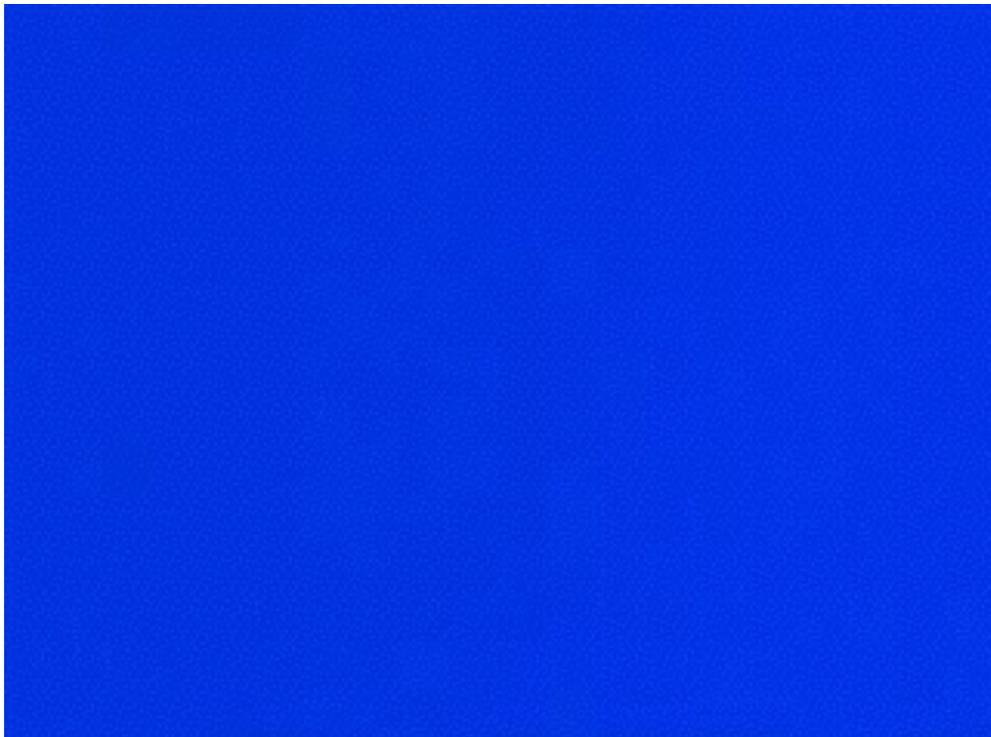


Fig. 4: Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993. Film still.

**1997, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.** For its first solo exhibition to be held at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, a Belgian fashion house collaborates with a Dutch microbiologist to create a series of eighteen dresses treated with different strains of bacteria and moulds that, as the exhibition progresses, are responsible for changing the colour and aspect of the garments which dress dummies displayed behind a glass wall. This is Maison Martin Margiela's *(9/4/1615)*.



Fig. 5: Maison Martin Margiela, *(9/4/1615)*, 1997. Installation view. Photo: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

**2001, Johannesburg, South Africa.** A white man in drag wears an old chandelier as if it was a tutu and struggles to balance himself on his disproportionately high high-heeled shoes while walking on debris, stones, and dirt in one of South Africa's shanty towns. Around him, workers hired by the local authority, armed with crowbars and wearing orange overalls, demolish the locals' dwellings to allow for the construction of the Nelson Mandela bridge. This is Steven Cohen's *Chandelier*.



Fig. 6: Steven Cohen, *Chandelier*, 2001. Photo: John Hogg.

2002, *Nature*, Vol. 415. Dutch Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen publishes an article in which he identifies a new epoch in geological time, an epoch which, for the first time, coincides with the period in which the scientist writes. That new epoch, the “Anthropocene,” is said to have started with the Industrial Revolution, when humans became the most important force at play in the Earth’s ecosystems. It does not take long for the term “Anthropocene” to enter the collective conscious.



Fig. 7: *Global Change* 78 (March 2012). Magazine cover.

**2008, London, England.** After announcing his true identity out loud to a packed theatre—“*My name is Romeo Castellucci*”, he says—the controversial Italian theatre director puts on a protection suit whilst a pack of German shepherds are led to the stage by their trainers. Once the suit is on, some of the animals are released and attack the artist, biting him while he lies, defenceless, on the floor. This is the prologue of Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s *Inferno*.



Fig. 8: Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Inferno*, 2008. Photo: Luca Del Pia.

**2010, Ljubljana, Slovenia.** A naked female body falls backwards, in slow motion, down the red-carpeted eighteen-century oval staircase of the Gruberjeva Palace. In its long fall, the body exists in the space between mastery and powerlessness, forced to permanently negotiate the unfolding of the event with the gravity that pulls it down and the late Baroque staircase that directs its fall. This is Kira O'Reilly's *Stair Falling*, a strange encounter between human body and architecture.



Fig. 9: Kira O'Reilly, *Stair Falling*, 2010. Photo: Nada Zgank.

**2011, World Wide Web.** In the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster a video appears on YouTube in which an anonymous worker, wearing a protection mask and coverall, approaches one of the CCTV cameras of the nuclear power plant, points at his contaminated surroundings and then at the centre of the camera, in what appears to be a reenactment of *Centers*, the 1971 performance for camera by Vito Acconci. After twenty minutes—the exact same duration of Acconci’s original work—the worker stops pointing and walks away. The video goes viral. This is the ecological age.



Fig. 10: Anonymous worker points a finger at a monitoring live camera, Fukushima 1 nuclear plant, 2011. Video still.

## —INTRODUCTION—

### Mapping a Journey

‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’  
‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.  
—Lewis Carroll<sup>1</sup>

#### Destination

What consequences does the ongoing ecological age have for existing ontologies of performance? And what effect might such renewed thinking about performance have upon Performance Studies, the academic field primarily concerned with that particular kind of phenomena? Can Performance Studies enter into a productive dialogue with recent philosophical projects that, under the umbrella of Speculative Realism, have attempted to think the real in a more ecological and less anthropocentric way?

The above are the guiding questions of the present dissertation. The premise upon which they rest is that, once the ecological crisis made humans recognise the entanglement of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture,’ the dreams of human autonomy and emancipation set up as part of the Enlightenment project started to progressively be called into question. As a result, various scholars in the Humanities are, today, reconsidering the certainty of the divide human/nonhuman on which the geographies of their disciplines have been drawn, trying to think more ecologically, and adapting their work to the rediscovered reality of a world in which humans, rather than emancipated, are increasingly enmeshed with nonhumans.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, with artworks by Yayoi Kusama (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 86.

As a branch of the Humanities, Performance Studies, too, has not been able to avoid the pressures of the ecological age. Some scholars in the field have already started rethinking its scope and trying to adapt its scholarship in order to better respond to the fall of the ontological wall that, at least since the eighteenth century, has, unsuccessfully, tried to keep humans and nonhumans apart.

It is in the context of the rediscovered entanglement of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ that the scenes described in the Prelude above appear. As diverse as they might seem, those scenes can be said to have one thing in common: they all highlight, in one way or another, through scientific or artistic means, the complex interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans:

In *Café Müller*, Pina Bausch and her dancers struggled to overcome the obstacles posed to their movement by the props on stage and the boundaries of the set. In the Chernobyl disaster, faulty human design led to a catastrophic nonhuman event which had tragic consequences for humans and local ecosystems for years to come. At the inaugural Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the nations of the world (or most of them) attempted, for the first of many unsuccessful times to come, to take responsibility over the ecological crisis and to agree on joint collective action to arrest its progression. One year later, at the Venice Film Festival, Derek Jarman premiered *Blue*, a film with which the artist attempted to make sense of himself and of the battlefield that was his own body, seized and taken hostage by an unbeatable virus and its army of opportunistic diseases. At Maison Martin Margiela’s exhibition in Rotterdam, the audiences were forced to confront their own fear of dirt and infection by watching fashion—that index of the human and of its ‘Culture’—being literally consumed by germs. In Steven Cohen’s piece *Chandelier*, and despite the different readings the piece might call for, one was drawn to the movements of an artist struggling with his disproportionately high high-heels, with the stones and debris on which he tried to walk, and with the incredibly heavy weight of the chandelier he wore.<sup>2</sup> In volume 415 of the journal *Nature*, a world-renowned scientist revealed the extent to which the future of the planet is being threatened by humans who, since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, have been mass-exploiting the

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<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth reading of *Chandelier* as well as some references to its potentially problematic racial politics, see Chapter Five below, pp. 233–236.

Earth's resources and releasing huge amounts of life-threatening gases into the atmosphere. In *Inferno*, the prologue to his take on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Romeo Castellucci gave away control over what took place on stage by letting in a pack of dogs and allowing them to attack him. In *Stair Falling*, Kira O'Reilly shared the authorship of her performance piece with gravity and the cold, hard stairs down which she slowly fell. And, finally, the video footage of the rogue Fukushima worker forced its viewers to face the ways in which human actions and natural phenomena often join forces as the trigger of major ecological disasters.

Approached in that way, all the scenes reveal the distress of a human being who is no longer in control, who no longer masters his/her own future or that of his/her environment. Be it in the surroundings of a Japanese nuclear power plant or in a fictional *kaffeehaus* built on the stage of a German opera theatre, all the human figures depicted above are struggling with a variety of nonhuman beings, caught in a more or less dangerous battle with animals, objects, architecture, viruses, radioactivity, debris, moulds, bacteria, and the planet itself, a battle the victor of which is anything but certain. All the above present humans and nonhumans as co-dependent, interconnected, enmeshed and involved in one another; in none of them can one find an occasion in which the human is able to thrive unchallenged. When faced with those scenes, one is caught by the feeling of unease that comes with the realisation that the shape of the future is anything but certain. Those are scenes that reawaken existential anxieties and the fear of falling, of failing, of losing, of dying in the face of a strange and uncontrollable nonhuman world.

What, then, are the consequences of having such enmeshment of humans and nonhumans highlighted? In particular, in what ways does it affect existing theories and practices of performance and that which goes on in the space of the theatre? For if theatre is normally seen as an existential mirror, as what Alan Read called "the human laboratory" due to its being a privileged space for humans to come face-to-face with their own humanity, what happens when one

witnesses works in which nonhumans play such important roles as challengers of the mastery usually ascribed to the human both on- and off-stage?<sup>3</sup>

These are questions guided by ecological concerns. They are also questions that have several ontological and epistemological implications. Their guiding concerns are ecological because they emerge out of the ways in which different kinds of beings, human and nonhuman, have been rediscovered enmeshed in one another, not only ‘out there’ on the site of the latest nuclear disaster but also ‘in here,’ in the apparently less life-threatening space of the theatre.<sup>4</sup> Their implications are ontological because, by drawing attention to the co-implication of humans and nonhumans, they question the certainty of the divide between ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature,’ a divide which, as Bruno Latour has argued, grounded the ideologies of human autonomy and emancipation at least since the critical project of Immanuel Kant and the Industrial Revolution.<sup>5</sup> And, finally, they have epistemological repercussions because, by troubling the ‘Nature’/‘Culture’ divide, they call for a rethinking of existing paradigms of knowledge and of the structure of academia itself, known as it is to have separated the Humanities from the Sciences, with the former researching social, political, and cultural phenomena while the latter study the ‘natural,’ nonhuman world.

They are questions triggered by the realisation that there is a global and catastrophic ecological crisis already going on. As it was suggested by the

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<sup>3</sup> See Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2–5; Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97–98; and Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Ecology is understood in this dissertation as the study of the interactions between all kinds of beings, human and nonhuman, living and nonliving. Departing from Ernest Haeckel’s original 1869 coinage of the term to designate the “scientific study of the interactions between organisms and their environment,” ecology will here be adapted to the reality of a world in which, as it will be discussed further below (pp. 29–30), ‘Nature’ or ‘the environment’ is no longer that which surrounds or *environs* ‘Culture’ but, rather, exists in a continuum with it. As such, ecological thinking is the thinking that addresses the ways in which beings encounter one another and create networks of influence without any primacy being given to ‘Nature’ over ‘Culture’ or vice-versa. In that sense, ecological thinking can address the natural world as much as it can address that which happens on the theatrical stage. For more on ecology and ecological thinking, see below, pp. 33–36. For Haeckel’s definition of ecology, see Michael Begon, Colin R. Townsend, and John L. Harper, *Ecology: From Individuals to Ecosystems* (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), xi.

<sup>5</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin Books, 2009). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

debates at the various Earth Summits that have been happening regularly since 1992, or by Paul Crutzen's identification of a new geological epoch inaugurated by the machine revolution, humans and nonhumans are increasingly tied together and dependent on one another.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, human actions can have substantial nonhuman consequences. In the present ecological age, ontology is flat, expansive, horizontal, and deprived of mastering transcendence either in the form of the supreme designer of the Abrahamic faiths, or in the shape of the human and its exceptionalism.<sup>7</sup>

In the ecological age—the present age—the validity of categories like 'Nature' and 'Culture,' as well as the ontological rift between humans and nonhumans, are also being challenged from within the Humanities themselves. Coming from a variety of fields and often by blurring the boundaries of their own disciplines, scholars have, for over twenty years now, been trying to think the world beyond human (and often phallogocentric) privilege and mastery. From the posthuman feminisms of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti to the new materialisms of Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett; from the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour to the "agential realism" of Karen Barad or the speculative realist moves of Quentin Meillassoux or Graham Harman, recent metaphysical thought has been trying once again to address the real beyond the human by daring to think a world—the ecological world—in which humans

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<sup>6</sup> The new geological epoch identified by Crutzen is the Anthropocene, the definition of which will be given in the next page.

<sup>7</sup> For more on ideas of human exceptionalism and their relationship with Western philosophical thought see below, pp. 60–66).

are either no longer present or, at least, not in full control.<sup>8</sup> It is fair to say that all those authors, despite their different approaches and often passionate disagreements, share a common interest in undoing the categories of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ through a troubling of the ontological rift between humans and nonhumans.

That rift between ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ has been troubled further and, arguably, irreversibly, in 2002 when, writing in the journal *Nature*, chemist Paul Crutzen proposed to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to “the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10-12 millenia.”<sup>9</sup> As he continued:

The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784.<sup>10</sup>

According to data quoted by Crutzen, since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the human population has increased tenfold to 6 billion, being expected to reach 10 billion before the end of the 21st century. Driven by

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<sup>8</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, “Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: how actors macro-structure reality and how sociologists help them do so,” in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: toward an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies*, eds. Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron V. Cicourel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2009); Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011). Although only some of the theses put forward by these authors will be discussed and used in building the argument of this dissertation, the interest they all seem to share in a thought that is able to overcome human exceptionalism is very much in line with the ethos of this project.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (2002), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Worth noting, in the context of the argument to be unfolded in this dissertation, that the latter part of the eighteenth century which, according to Crutzen, coincided with the beginning of the Anthropocene, also saw the publication, in 1781, of the first edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

changes in the human dietary habits made possible by the industrialisation of food supply chains, the methane-producing cattle population has risen to 1.4 billion and the fishing industry has removed more than 25% of the primary fish production in upwelling ocean regions and 35% in the temperate continental shelf, with 30-50% of the planet's land surface being exploited by humans. While dams and river diversions have been made possible thanks to the development of engineering and have become common realities around the globe with cities like London having its small rivers now flowing through underground systems, tropical forests are disappearing and more than half of all accessible fresh water is being used by humans. Energy use has increased 16-fold during the twentieth century, leading to the emission of 160 million tonnes of atmospheric sulphur dioxide per year, more than twice the sum of its natural emissions, while more nitrogen fertiliser is applied in agriculture than is able to be fixed naturally by all terrestrial ecosystems. Added to that, fossil-fuel burning and agriculture have caused substantial increases in the concentration of greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide by 30% and methane by more than 100%, reaching their highest levels of the past 400 millennia. As a consequence of all those effects, caused so far by only 25% of the world population, the Earth's climate is changing dramatically and faster than it has ever done in the previous 12 millennia of the Holocene, with global warming, climate change, and carbon emissions having become a regular feature in party-political debates and on the front pages of newspapers and magazines.<sup>11</sup>

Crutzen's thesis confirms what some scholars have been speculating for the best part of 20 years, i.e. that the separation between 'Nature' and 'Culture' is anything but clear or even certain. That being the case, how does that affect performance theory? Is it possible to speculate on what performance might mean, on how differently it might or might not look, on the flattened ontological grounds of the Anthropocene? And can current and future understandings of what it means to perform respond to the fall of the wall between 'Nature' and 'Culture'? If so, what could be the consequences—epistemological, ethical, political, etc.—of rethinking, reenacting, reconfiguring, and reshaping performance and its theories in light of the challenges of the ecological age?

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<sup>11</sup> See *ibid* for the full breadth of the human impact on the planet's ecosystems.

Theories of theatre and performance have, at least since ancient Greece, been predominantly centred in the human as forms of cultural production.<sup>12</sup> From Plato's rejection of mimesis to its recovery as a didactic tool at the hands of Aristotle; from Brecht's political writing on theatre to the field-defining works of scholars such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan, performance has, until fairly recently, been mostly thought as something that depends on the presence of human bodies, whether as performers or as audiences. As Marvin Carlson wrote, "[performance] is always performance *for someone*, some audience that recognises and validates it as performance [...]."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, what both the ecological crisis and the recent resurgence of materialist and realist metaphysical projects show is that any attempts at isolating the human from the nonhuman and making the latter dependent on the former are, at best, wishful thinking. In the ecological age, when humans and nonhumans are so enmeshed in promiscuous relationships with one another that it no longer makes sense to keep them apart in knowledge formations, how can performance be said equally of both sides of the old divide between 'Nature' and 'Culture'? Is it possible to theorise "performance *as such*"?<sup>14</sup>

## Transport

The method chosen to, at least in a provisional manner, try to address the place of performance in the ecological age is indebted to the tradition of speculative thought found everywhere in continental philosophy from Plato to Deleuze,

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<sup>12</sup> See Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*, 2; also, Claudia Castellucci et al., *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 5 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> I owe the phrase "performance as such" to Alan Read. It has taken me a while to find a term to describe the main object of this dissertation as no term seemed ever able to fully point in a concise manner to what I was trying to think. No term, that is, until Alan Read's book *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement* was recommended to me towards the end of my doctoral research. At one point in the book, Read claimed that human performance is simply a subset of "performance 'as such'" (Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*, 82), where the latter is defined simply by the presence of "the two key qualifiers of performance, its liveness and the audience/performer act of spectation" (Ibid., 85). Read's minimal definition of performance 'as such' will hopefully vibrate in sympathy with the notion of performance that will be put forward in this dissertation, despite the fact that I only became acquainted with it after having already written much of what you are about to read.

Spinoza to Derrida. It does, however, take that speculative tradition further by refashioning it after the ecocritical work of authors such as Timothy Morton.<sup>15</sup>

“Speculative Philosophy,” Alfred North Whitehead wrote in *Process and Reality*, “is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”<sup>16</sup> By seeking to produce a coherent system of general ideas that is applicable to all instances of everyday experience, i.e. to “everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought,” the task of speculative thought is that of finding the “essence to the universe,” through a method of metaphysical generalisation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by concerning itself with what Whitehead called the “larger generalities,” speculative philosophy was developed as master(ing)-thought, a thought that ought to be coherent and applicable to all instances of the real and, as such, also detached from the mundane everyday concerns of the scientific disciplines and their particular areas of study.<sup>18</sup>

The problem with such purely speculative approach is that, by definition, it exists disconnected from the catastrophic reality which humans and nonhumans are increasingly forced to face and that, therefore and as it is, it offers little contribution to problems such as the ones arising from the ongoing ecological crisis. Because global warming is a particular atmospheric event and not a

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<sup>15</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–5.

<sup>18</sup> There is an important passage in *Process and Reality* that illustrates the relationship between speculative philosophy and scientific thought in a very clear and straightforward way. In it, Whitehead wrote:

“The field of a special science is confined to one genus of facts, in the sense that no statements are made respecting facts which lie outside that genus. The very circumstance that a science has naturally arisen concerning a set of facts secures that facts of that type have definite relations among themselves which are very obvious to all mankind. [...]

“The study of philosophy is a voyage towards the larger generalities. For this reason in the infancy of science, when the main stress lay in the discovery of the most general ideas usefully applicable to the subject-matter in question, philosophy was not sharply distinguished from science. To this day, a new science with any substantial novelty in its notions is considered to be in some way peculiarly philosophical. In their later stages, apart from occasional disturbances, most sciences accept without question the general notions in terms of which they develop. The main stress is laid on the adjustment and the direct verification of more special statements. In such periods scientists repudiate philosophy [...].” (*Ibid.*, 9–10).

larger metaphysical category, it should remain the concern of scientists and not cross their doorstep into the abstract outdoors of speculative thought.

With such disinterest in everyday reality and concerned instead with challenging scientific knowledge—what, as this argument progresses, will also be identified with the ethos of critique—speculative philosophers eventually found themselves doing metaphysics as the world on which they stood progressed towards obliteration.<sup>19</sup> Thus, whilst the present dissertation takes up speculation as its method for tentatively rehearsing an ecological general theory of performance, its speculative exercises are grounded on the urgent need of a better understanding of the implications the troubling of the divide between ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ can have for performance scholarship.

Not merely concerned with the “larger generalities” proposed by Whitehead as the main object of speculative philosophy, this dissertation will align itself with what Timothy Morton called “the ecological thought,” the thought that “thinks big” through increasing one’s awareness of the “mesh,” the vast “interconnectedness of all living and non-living things.<sup>20</sup> However, because it is triggered by the discovery of what Morton called “hyperobjects,” i.e. realities that, like Styrofoam, plutonium, and climate itself, “exist on almost unthinkable timescales,” ecological thinking, in being both speculative and realist, is also aware of its inability to master the real while nonetheless trying to, somehow, think it.<sup>21</sup> In Morton’s words:

When we think big we discover a hole in our psychological universe. There is no way of measuring anything anymore, since there is nowhere “outside” this universe from which to take an impartial measurement. Strangely, thinking big doesn’t mean that we put everything in a big box. Thinking big means that the box melts into nothing in our hands.<sup>22</sup>

Or, in an even more poetic passage that illustrates the anxiety of someone who, faced with an enormous danger, has nowhere to run to:

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<sup>19</sup> For details on the problems associated with methodologies of critique, see below, pp. 60–66.

<sup>20</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 20, 28.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Morton’s concept of “hyperobject,” see *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

The ecological disaster is like being in a cinema when suddenly the movie itself melts. Then the screen melts. Then the cinema itself melts. Or you realize your chair is crawling with maggots.<sup>23</sup>

As such, although concerned with thinking larger generalities like any other ontological project, this dissertation is also very much aware of its own limits when forced to face the hyperreality of the ongoing ecological disaster. In other words, it is because it departs from a realisation that the ecological crisis calls into question human dreams of mastery over the real and the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide, that this dissertation will pursue its speculative enquiry on performance with the knowledge that there will always be a part of its object of study that it won't be able to grasp or anticipate. As a result, it will highlight the real as ultimately strange rather than positing it as a fully graspable and certain world. In doing so, this project will make a claim for the performative nature of all encounters between all kinds of bodies, whilst never losing sight of its own reality as performance, a reality enacted in the encounter between the body of this text and you as its reader.

In a flat world where beings are enmeshed in one another, method should not come before that which it will eventually lead to. Instead, method, form and their outcomes or contents are fully intertwined like the threads in a piece of fabric. Therefore, as a text guided by ecological concerns, this thesis will embrace its own ecology by becoming aware of its reality as a system of relations and connections, clusters and collisions. It will also attempt to become something close to a geological formation by making use of pressure, movement, and flows in order to fuse and fission concepts and ideas. It will, ultimately, try to become an example of that which it has set itself to think; it will explore its own poietic existence. If, as it will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three, *poiēsis* is the name of the performative power of all bodies, a thesis that aims to remain faithful to the performative character of its encounter with a reader will have to embrace its poietic weapons openly. Furthermore, if the aim is to think while nonetheless remaining unable to master, the text must simultaneously explore new strategies to convey meaning whilst never losing sight of the ultimate strangeness of that which it tries to think.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 32.

As a consequence, this thesis aims to reflect, in both its content and poetic style, a certain feeling of being late: too late to write, too late to think, too late to act in the hope of avoiding the ecological catastrophe that, for what it's worth, has already started. As late writing and late thought, this thesis is written from a position of anxiety, of feeling powerless in the face of imminent danger. It is writing written when it is already too late to write; it is writing that precludes the possibility of its own cathartic finale. It is, as it was already mentioned, writing that is aware of itself as failure, unable to master the real and determine its unfolding. In such circumstances, the only thing this writing sets itself to do is to tentatively point in the direction of that which it knows it can't fully grasp: that which will remain strange in all encounters. For, as Timothy Morton wrote:

Heidegger poetically said that you never hear the wind in itself, only the storm whistling in the chimney, the wind in the trees. The same is true of the mesh itself. You never perceive it directly. But you can detect it in the snails, the sea thrift, and the smell of the garbage can.<sup>24</sup>

Although unable to master the real, as writing that comes too late to avoid the ecological crisis, this will be guided by two aims: 1) it will try to highlight the uncomfortable strangeness of the real that it, itself, will remain unable to grasp, and 2) it will to avoid existing styles of writing which have historically tried to safely master the real within the confines of their pages.

Taking mainstream environmental rhetoric as an example of the kind of mastering discourse this dissertation will try to avoid, Morton, again, provided a useful description of it:

Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine; it privileges speech over writing; and it simulates immediacy (feigning one-to-one correspondences between language and reality). It's sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and "healthy." Where does this leave negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? Are these simply nonecological categories?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

As it was shown by the scenes included in the Prelude, human mastery of the nonhuman is an impossible task. Its pursuit has led to the revelation of its own impossibility. Writing after the ecological crisis has already begun—writing late—is thus a dark, uncertain, literally near-death (perhaps even post-death) experience; it holds no place for mastering discourses and masculinist certainties. And even less does it allow humanist ideologies or any other attempts to reinstate ontological divides between ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature.’

With a style that is close to Edward Said’s understanding of “late style,” writing after (and because of) the ecological crisis is writing that “[stirs] up more anxiety, [that tampers] irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and [that leaves] the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before”.<sup>26</sup> It is, following Adorno, a writing that is closer to the essay form than to the certainties of the established style of academic writing. Considering the latter to be a kind of writing marked by “comprehensive general views” and “continuity of presentation,” the essayistic style of ecological writing pursued by this thesis is, instead, characterised by discontinuity and experimentation.<sup>27</sup> If dominant styles of scholarly writing seek legitimacy through the adoption of recognisable methods of enquiry, ecological writing—writing that comes late—is closer to creative than to critical writing. Because there is no outside mastering position it can safely occupy in order to look at the world, because it is always already implicated in whatever it writes about, ecological writing of the kind that will be pursued here is a kind of “veering” in the sense Nicholas Royle has given to the term: a veering away from anthropocentric, logocentric, egocentric, and subject-

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 7. In that book, Said investigated the late works of several artists and authors that, against what one usually believes late works to be, don’t exhibit any serene “ripeness of style” (ibid.) but are, instead, “a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it” (ibid., 16). Being felt as uncanny in their representations of catastrophe, late works of authors such as Beethoven, Ibsen, Adorno, Genet, etc., manifest a “sustained tension, unaccommodated stubbornness, lateness, and newness next to each other by virtue of an ‘inexorable clamp that holds together what no less powerfully strives to break apart” (ibid., 17). Although it is not the aim of this dissertation to place itself alongside the late works discussed in *On Late Style*—that would have been ridiculous at best—Said’s study of the ways in which lateness manifests itself in musical and literary works is rather useful for thinking the style writing might have to adopt in order to cope with its own being late *vis-à-vis* the ecological crisis. Although Said’s book deals with the final works of writers and artists that are, individually, approaching death and the end of their careers, it is fair to say that, if writing is depersonalised and thought of as a product of the human, it could in principle manifest the same kind of troubling qualities after humans as a species realise the failure of their project of emancipation and the imminence of their own disappearance.

<sup>27</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 10–11.

centred paradigms of knowing.<sup>28</sup> Ecological writing is, therefore, writing that is attuned to the strangeness of words understood as part and parcel of an equally strange and ultimately ungraspable universe. It is writing that allows for an intimate encounter with the strangeness of the real or, as Royle wrote of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*:

[It is] an experience of uncertainty of time and place, a universe of swerving atoms, from the swirling movements of what passes through water and air and goes rippling through our limbs to the sways of fear and pleasure in the mind: sheer veering.<sup>29</sup>

## **Landscape**

When writing a PhD thesis, it is customary to position one's contribution to knowledge within an existing academic field. Such a move, close to being a disclaimer, allows the reader—that is, you—to fine tune his or her critical parameters to the standards that come with concrete expectations before the task of reading even begins: What are the defining texts in the field? Does the student start by acknowledging them? Does the already existing literature address questions or problems that might be similar or closely related to the ones the student is setting him- or herself to tackle? If so, to what extent is the student aware of that fact, and how does he or she depart from or add to what has been written before?

By claiming a field, by outing oneself as citizen of an academic territory, as the newest cog in a preexisting epistemological machine, the future doctor—may the gods help him or her—aims to thread safely on a recognisable landscape, even if the particular road he or she chooses to open from here to there is not normally mapped out in advance. Voicing one's academic field is, like stating one's citizenship, identity, or belonging, something one generally does for increasing the chances of survival: in our being together, we are usually stronger.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

The problem with the above is that we often find ourselves building homes—that is to say, drawing boundaries, erecting walls, creating divides—in order to feel together. When we claim to belong here or there, we are necessarily denying ourselves the advantages that might come with belonging elsewhere, belonging only temporarily (as a tourist, a visitor, an observer, an asylum seeker), or even not belonging at all (being nomad). We are also, more often than not, deciding who or what will be allowed in with us, in our homes, in our nations, in our property. And that, I believe, is something we can no longer afford to do in the ecological age. The ecological age, as it was seen above when discussing methodology, demands “thinking big”—when the end is nigh, it comes for us all, regardless of where we live, of what we look like, or of the thickness of the walls we surround ourselves with. “Thinking big” means there is no time to build fences or dig trenches—the sooner we leave the safety of our houses, the sooner we will be forced to face the full extent of the damage. Boundaries—between identities, species, nations, genders, modes of being, and even academic disciplines—serve, I believe, only to prevent action, as it will become clearer as this thesis progresses. They might make us feel safer, but feeling safe is worth nothing when the only thing left to breathe in is thick fire. Or, provided you need another image, building walls won’t prevent the ground underneath our feet from cracking open.

Few people have got the full ecological implications of that refusal of boundaries better than Deleuze and Guattari in their “Treatise on Nomadology,” part of *A Thousand Plateaus*. In it, and in their usual poetic style, the pair identified two kinds of science, one that “reproduces” and one that “follows,” the difference being that,

[reproducing] implies the permanence of a fixed point of *view* that is external to what is reproduced: watching the flow from the bank. But following is something different from the ideal of reproduction. Not better, just different. One is obliged to follow when one is in search of the “singularities” of a matter, or rather of a material, and not out to discover a form; when one escapes the force of gravity to enter a field of celerity; when one ceases to contemplate the course of a laminar flow in a determinate direction, to be carried away by a vortical flow; when one engages in a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting

constants from them, etc. And the meaning of Earth completely changes [...].<sup>30</sup>

What could be more ecological than having “the meaning of Earth” change as a result of our choosing to jump on a river and follow its flow rather than to stand on the safety of its banks and watch it go by in the hope we won’t be carried away with it? What could make thought bigger—that is, more ecological—other than insistently denying oneself the comfort that comes with the sight of a clearly demarcated border-horizon?

Because I believe that only through denying oneself comforting viewing platforms can one sketch new knowledges that match this ecological ambition, this dissertation will refuse being contained within the boundaries of a single academic discipline. Therefore, it should not be seen as making its way along a homogenous and clearly delimited scholarly field. If boundaries are seen to be drawn at times for the sake of—say—clarity, they should always be thought of as both porous and contingent. Nevertheless, in the end, the text you hold in your hands aims at being a doctoral thesis and, as such, it is expected to abide by certain rules and to conform with certain expectations—this, it is hoped, will grant it scholarly recognition. And as scholarly recognition is its more practical aim, I cannot but attempt, even if only provisionally, to briefly sketch the territory through which this work will be moving (even if said territory will remain a swamp or, at best, a rather muddy and slippery field).

The research project which has resulted in this dissertation departed, as it was already seen, from asking an old question in a new context. The question “what is performance?”—an ontological one—is a question to which many scholars working in the field of Performance Studies have already devoted themselves on several occasions. From Richard Schechner to Jon McKenzie, from Peggy Phelan to Alan Read, their work has been crucial for thinking what we think when we think performance.

As it will be developed in detail in Chapter Two, Schechner’s inaugural works on performance presented it as a kind of social, repeated, and/or ritualised type of behaviour that is often responsible for (re-)shaping the structural organisation of

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<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 372.

societies.<sup>31</sup> Due to its indebtedness to Anthropology, especially to Victor Turner's ritual studies, Schechner's work has been primarily concerned with performance as a certain type of human behaviour responsible for enacting the social.<sup>32</sup>

Phelan, on the other hand, drew from a different source, psychoanalysis, in order to build her ontology of performance, in what might be one of the most quoted works of Performance Studies, *Unmarked*.<sup>33</sup> If, for Schechner, performance is responsible for making and structuring worlds, for Phelan, in her privileging of the liveness of the encounter, performance is, instead, responsible for undoing worlds and refusing their structures. In its inability to be reproduced or fixed, that is, in its absolute ephemerality, performance is, for Phelan, always already disappearing and, therefore, impossible to be arrested. As Alan Read put it recently, "Schechner's position could be identified as a binding to the social, while Phelan's was recognised as a tactical withdrawal from [it]."<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the differences between the two positions, what both authors have in common is a clear focus on the human in performance: Schechner, due to his anthropological concerns with the social, and Phelan, due to her psychoanalytical focus on performance's troubling of human subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> As such, both authors are primarily focused on 'Culture,' the realm that appears in opposition to 'Nature' and one of the sides of the ontological divide this dissertation will try to trouble in response to the demands of the ecological age.

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> This is somehow a generalisation for Richard Schechner has indeed more than once reflected on instances of performative behaviour in animals, something that will also be discussed in Chapter Two below. However, as it will be further argued later, his work is mostly concerned with making claims about performance in relation to the human sphere, even when writing about instances of nonhuman performance (see below, pp. 93–94).

<sup>33</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*, 55.

<sup>35</sup> As Phelan wrote:

"In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of 'presence.' But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—dance, movement, sound, character, 'art.' [...] Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se* [...]" (Phelan, *Unmarked*, 150–151).

Still, various performance scholars have already tried to take Performance Studies beyond the human and its social and cultural apparatuses. Examples of those are Jon McKenzie and, more recently, Alan Read who, in very different ways, have questioned the discipline's privileging of human performances aimed at structuring an all-too-human social system.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the necessity of liveness for the performance encounter, a thesis that is central in Phelan's work, has also been questioned by scholars such as Philip Auslander and Amelia Jones.<sup>37</sup> Still, none of those authors has really been able to sufficiently push performance beyond the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide. That is because, in my view, although they have opened the way for nonhuman and even nonliving bodies to be seen as performers in their own right—e.g. performing documents or technological apparatuses—they have nonetheless kept the human as the ultimate spectator for whom those performances take place.<sup>38</sup> As such, this thesis will be both inspired and challenged by their work, and try to depart from it in order to, even if only tentatively, rephrase older questions and open up new ones on the nature, place, and role of performance in the ecological age.

However, if Performance Studies is the primary field on which this thesis will move in its rethinking of performance, there are other branches of knowledge which, due to their being concerned with the broad ecological question, will have to also be acknowledged as parallel landscapes this research project has had to venture across. Amongst those fields, it is important to note my indebtedness to continental philosophy (especially the broad umbrella of so-called speculative realism and object-oriented ontology), and ecocriticism.

Continental philosophy has been invaluable in helping me understand the full breadth of the consequences the ecological crisis is having on ideologies of progress, emancipation, and (human) autonomy. From the thinkers to whom I am indebted, I would highlight Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Bruno

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<sup>36</sup> See, Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 29–53; and Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*, 81–101.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 1–10; and Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997):11–18.

<sup>38</sup> This argument will be developed in Chapter Two (see below, pp. 95–97).

Latour, and Jane Bennett.<sup>39</sup> All of them, despite their recurrent disagreements which I won't be addressing, have convinced me of the urgency of rethinking the human-nonhuman divide as part of a broader response to the unfolding of the ecological age.<sup>40</sup> That has provided the launching platform for the central question of this dissertation: what does performance look like in the absence of humans? However, despite my indebtedness to their work, I also hope to give something back by highlighting the rather crucial role performance plays in—say—Harman's theory of causation.<sup>41</sup>

There is another field or class of scholarly discourse that, at the intersection of continental philosophy, literary criticism, and queer and feminist theories, also shares similar concerns with this research project, the field of posthumanism. Normally associated with the likes of Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, or Rosi Braidotti, posthumanism also intends to think the world under the very real effacing of the boundaries between 'Nature' and 'Culture.' In that sense, it can be said that posthumanism is also a core landmark in the theoretical landscape through which this thesis will be moving. For, as Braidotti noted, what all posthumanist theorists seem to share is a belief in the continuum 'Nature'—'Culture' instead of a defence of the divide 'Nature'/'Culture.'<sup>42</sup> Still, the ground shared by posthuman theorists appears to be just that, certainly due to

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<sup>39</sup> This is by no means an exclusive list. As it will become clear as this dissertation progresses, other thinkers have played a role no smaller than the one played by the ones I have just named.

<sup>40</sup> I have spent quite a lot of time trying to decide whether or not to address, as part of this thesis, the philosophical disagreements between thinkers like Harman and Latour, or Harman and Meillassoux, or Harman and Bennett, or even between all the latter and others such as Ray Brassier, François Laruelle, or other thinkers who share similar realist or materialist concerns but who do often passionately disagree with the likes of Harman, Latour, and Bennett to whom this thesis, at times, owes a lot. Nonetheless, at least a footnote would have to be written as a kind of disclaimer: whereas I share some of the concerns and am convinced by some of the thesis of Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology and Latour's Actor-Network Theory, by no means I intend, here, to align myself with a particular philosophical discourse, to become a disciple of a 'movement,' whether Harman's or someone else's. My primary concern is with opening up a set of questions concerning that thing we call performance, its present state and its possible ecological future. Therefore, for addressing that concern of mine, I am happy to use and sometimes abuse various claims of otherwise contradictory philosophical positions. That, however, is one of the advantages of not restricting one's dwelling to the established confines of one discipline: philosophy, as a unified field has, like all other disciplines, adopted certain codes and modes of working that provide philosophers with the legitimacy and comfort that being recognised by one's peers brings. I, on the other hand and as this introduction has hopefully already shown, take much more pleasure and pride from nomadism and promiscuity. Sometimes love is a problem for which polygamy is the only foreseeable solution.

<sup>41</sup> This is something that will be discussed in further detail from Chapter Two onwards.

<sup>42</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

the fact that several scholars of the posthuman appear to have arrived at the 'Nature'–'Culture' continuum via different roads and with different methodologies: some, such as Hayles, arrived at it through cybernetics and the work done at the quasi-mythical Macy Conferences of 1946–1953, whilst others like Judith Butler got into it via Foucault's work on biopolitics and technologies of Self. Some, like Haraway, departed from the ideas of hybridity and perversity embodied in the (feminised) figure of the cyborg, whilst others such as Braidotti aligned themselves with the thinking of flows and multiplicities that can be found in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.<sup>43</sup> Further to all the differences that emerge out of such diverse avenues of enquiry, the term 'posthuman' is also in itself quite controversial. As Haraway noted when reflecting on her abandonment of the term 'posthuman' which she had used in her early work:<sup>44</sup>

I never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist. For one thing, urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other asymmetrical differences.<sup>45</sup>

A totally opposite take on the term can be found in Braidotti who, nonetheless, shares with Haraway an interest in reflecting on what makes humans human:

The posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject.<sup>46</sup>

Hayles' work, too, is primarily focused on a reconceptualisation of the human, albeit this time under the light of an increasingly networked informational world. As she argued:

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<sup>43</sup> See Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi–xvi; and Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 38–54.

<sup>44</sup> For Haraway's early use of the term 'posthuman,' see, for instance, Donna Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 47–61.

<sup>45</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 37.

Whereas the ‘human’ has since the Enlightenment been associated with rationality, free will, autonomy, and a celebration of consciousness as the seat of identity, the posthuman in its more nefarious forms is construed as an informational pattern that happens to be instantiated in a biological substrate.<sup>47</sup>

What the three passages above show is how unstable the term ‘posthuman’ is and the different, often contradictory, ways in which it has been thought, used, and valued by theorists who nevertheless appear to be interested in similar projects. Further, the concern with rethinking the human under the light of the ‘Nature’–‘Culture’ continuum that is demonstrated by Haraway, Braidotti and Hayles falls out of the scope of this thesis even if it does resonate with a big part of its premise and line of enquiry. Because the present project is primarily interested in thinking what performance might mean when the human is not present—either because it became too unstable a taxon, because it became extinct as a species, or simply because it did not take part as either performer or audience in a particular performance encounter—neither Haraway’s, Braidotti’s, nor Hayles’ focus on rethinking the human after the ‘Human’ is sufficient to lead this boat to its desired shore. That said, there will be references throughout this thesis to all of those theorists, some more explicit than others, some agreeing whilst others disagreeing with part of their arguments.

Finally, ecocriticism has been crucial in thinking the ways in which ideas of ‘Nature’ have become sedimented in layers upon layers of collective memory thanks, in part, to literature. Hard to define as a discipline, ecocriticism is a mostly north-american subset of literary criticism that, since the mid-1980s and in an avowedly political manner, has attempted to do for ‘Nature’ and ‘the environment’ what feminist literary critics, for instance, have done for gender, that is, to track down and analyse the ways in which those categories have been described and, to a certain extent, constructed through literary

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<sup>47</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7&8 (2006): 160.

representations.<sup>48</sup> As Cheryll Glotfelty wrote, rather concisely, in her introduction to the field-defining 1996 book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*:

[Ecocriticism] is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.<sup>49</sup>

Despite early ecocriticism having been primarily concerned with the ‘Nature’ and ‘wilderness’ writings of Romantic authors such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, or William Wordsworth, today it explores the co-dependency of the terms ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture,’ ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman,’ as they are negotiated in a broader variety of media, from science-fiction novels to television shows, from contemporary poetry to visual art practices.<sup>50</sup> The questions asked are often varied but all depart from the premise that human ‘Culture’ and ‘Natural’ world, as well as the realities which they attempt to circumscribe, are always already entangled in a rather fundamental way. According to Glotfelty, some of the contemporary lines of enquiry attempt to answer questions such as:

How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? [...] In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of

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<sup>48</sup> See Anne Milne, “Ecocriticism,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, eds. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 280–284.

<sup>49</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

<sup>50</sup> See Milne, “Ecocriticism,” 281–282; and Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effects?<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, by trying to show how existing representations of ‘Nature,’ as well as their meaning, are inseparable from the cultural apparatuses that give rise to them and often supported by ideologies of human autonomy, mastery, and freedom—the longing for the “great outdoors,” for instance, being nothing more than a symptom of one’s mastery over it—ecocritical works by the likes of Timothy Morton, Greg Garrard, and Timothy Clark amongst many others have allowed me to think ecologically whilst trying to undo or, at least, problematise, popular notions of ‘Nature’ and, as a consequence, also of ‘Culture.’

Notwithstanding what has just been claimed in the above paragraphs, this section does not intend to be an exhaustive naming of my fellow travel companions nor a full explanation of how I will borrow and possibly depart from their work. As I move along this road, many other companions will join me, our paths will cross for a while, and then they will take us apart with the same ease as they brought us together. As the road is long and the journey rarely a lonely one, naming everybody with whom I may walk for a while would be a rather lengthy affair. Doing the travel is always better than looking at someone else’s photos of it. Therefore, I can only hope that, as I take you on this journey, you will forgive me for all the blank spaces I purposefully left open here as you become surprised, hopefully in a positive way, by all the strange and unexpected bodies, human and nonhuman, we will encounter along the way.

## **Road**

Divided into five Chapters and a Conclusion, and punctuated by an Interlude and a Fugue, this thesis will draw from and build upon existing work in Performance Studies, Philosophy, and Ecocriticism, in order to sketch, however tentatively, a general theory of performance for the ecological age.

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<sup>51</sup> Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” xix.

With that aim in mind, Chapter One will depart from an analysis of Vito Acconci's 1971 performance for camera *Centers*, and of its 2011 reenactment at the site of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, in order to explore the challenges that the current ecological age poses to the pursuit of human autonomy and emancipation from 'Nature.' By looking at those two performances for camera as well as at the genealogy of ideologies of human emancipation since Kant, the first chapter will claim that the Western investment in human autonomy has laid the ground for the development of a deeply narcissistic human civilisation.

In line with the argument of Chapter One, Chapter Two, "Performance on the Anthropocenic Stage," will begin by tracing the history of human exceptionalism surrounding the term 'performance' from its first utterance on the Shakespearean stage through to its contemporary use in relation to a "broad spectrum" of events ranging from religious rituals to performance art pieces. After looking at the various ways in which the term has been used historically and in response to the variable degrees of anthropocentrism that can be found underlying many of such uses, the chapter will then draw from the work of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Graham Harman in order to open up a new framework for thinking performance in such a way that the human is no longer its *condicio sine qua non*. Triggered by the pressing issues arising from the ongoing ecological crisis and identified in Chapter One, Chapter Two will try to rehearse performance theory beyond human mastery and open the way for performance to be understood in a *broader than broad spectrum*, as the way in which all bodies, human and nonhuman, encounter one another whilst remaining strangers to each other. In doing so, the chapter will also stress the ecological interconnectedness of all kinds of bodies whilst nonetheless maintaining that, despite their tight enmeshment in one another, bodies will always remain separated by a distance that is better described as theatrical.

Chapter Two will be followed by an Interlude in which Art Orienté Objet's work *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* and Pina Bausch's landmark piece *Café Müller* will be used as case studies for presenting the ways in which the ecological theory of performance just sketched has also been enacted in two very different performance artworks. The reason behind the choice of pieces has to do with the fact that both the French bioart duo Art Orienté Objet and choreographer Pina Bausch have, despite the apparent divergency of their interests, always

made works that, in one way or another, troubled the certainty of the divide 'Nature'/'Culture.' As such, the Interlude will claim that both *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* and *Caffé Müller* present human and nonhuman bodies as well as their encounter in a way that resonates with and strengthens the argument put forward in the two previous chapters.

Following on from that, and if, as Chapter Two claimed, all relations can be thought of in terms of performance, Chapter Three, "Silent Shouts," will take up some of the questions already explored in this Introduction whilst thinking about method, and engage with the strategies that might be adopted in order to somehow highlight the other side of the theatrical space that separates a performance from the always already strange presence of the body performing it. In order to do so, the chapter will reflect on the work that performance scholars have been doing since the 1990s trying to address the problems one faces when writing about performance, that is, about events that, due to their very nature, can never be fully translated into photography, video, or critical writing. Owing to Peggy Phelan's and Della Pollock's work on performative writing as a kind of writing that is able to capture and communicate something about a performance whilst not attempting to mask with certainty the ultimate elusiveness of its nature, Chapter Three will place performative writing in a lineage of ekphrastic writing that can be traced all the way to Homer's *Iliad* and claim its use of metaphor to be particularly successful in allowing the strangeness of bodies to be foregrounded. As such, metaphor will be posited as a rhetoric device that highlights the unavoidable theatrical distance separating two bodies whilst simultaneously, and because of that, making that distance the shortest it can ever be. In terms of academic practice, then, that process entails the adoption of non-traditional forms of critical writing or, better, of writing that happens half-way between critical reflection and creative practice. However, unlike earlier forms of that practice and due to the ecological premise of this thesis, performative writing as explored here will not be reenacting and strengthening the anthropocentric legacies of postmodernism or post-structuralism as it did in the 1990s, but it will instead emerge as a valid epistemological tool for the ecological age.

In line with that argument, Chapter Four will reflect on an instance in which the metaphoric strategies that mark performative writing have been successfully

used as epistemological tools by an artist attempting to convey the absolute strangeness of a body he knew himself unable to master. In the style of another case study, the example of performative writing that will be analysed in this chapter is Derek Jarman's *Blue*. In "Blue, or Performing Metaphor," Jarman's film will be used to explore the efficacy of performative metaphors as catalysts of strange visions in a world marked by blindness. The argument will be built around an analysis of the poetic strategies Jarman used to represent AIDS, a goal the artist himself, as it will be seen, had always known to be unattainable. As a direct result of Jarman's awareness of that fact, *Blue* emerged as a grand metaphorical gesture, one that, instead of trying and failing to portray a reality, did instead embrace the impossibility of such task and, through that, pointed to the theatrical cleavage separating the artist-spectator from that which he tried, unsuccessfully, to picture. Through his systematic use of metaphors voiced against the blinding light of a flickering International Klein Blue projection, Derek Jarman was able to allude to the strangeness of AIDS and to the space found between the concrete private reality of a body struggling (and slowly dying) with the syndrome and the abstract phenomenon of an epidemic being constructed and construed through public discourse and mass-circulated images of pain and suffering. By persistently making different bodies—colours, images, sounds, ideas—collide with and rub against one another, Jarman did, in *Blue*, hyperbolise metaphor and, through that, was able to turn blindness into the most successful form of sight. In doing so, the artist revealed how one's perception of another body—in this case a body suffering from AIDS or AIDS-in-itself—is always already metaphoric. Therefore, only a conscientious embrace and hyperbolising of metaphor can make metaphor itself visible and, as a result, foreground the theatricality of bodies as they are encountered.

While the sudden awareness of the ultimate strangeness of bodies, triggered by the foregrounding of the theatrical space between them, could be seen to lead to a reinstatement of the split between 'Culture' and 'Nature,' a crucial difference between the pursuit of human autonomy discussed in Chapter One and that of the thesis put forward here will, by the end of Chapter Four, have hopefully emerged: whereas the pursuit of human autonomy culminated in the tautology of a human surrounding itself with its own humanity, the present thesis aims to interrupt that *mise-en-abyme* by pointing to the distance that separates not only

human ‘Culture’ from nonhuman ‘Nature,’ but ultimately every single body, human and nonhuman, from all other bodies at the time of their encounter. If, for much of post-Kantian philosophy, the only knowledge that was available to humans was knowledge of themselves and their own mental structures, through this thesis’ extension of the notion of performance to all encounters, all bodies, human and nonhuman, will emerge as absolute strangers to both each other and themselves.

After the absolute strangeness of bodies and consequent unpredictability of their encounter is claimed, Chapter Five, “Blind Dates,” will address the ecopolitical implications of the argument unfolded theretofore. If the Anthropocene and the ecological crisis have highlighted the entanglement of humans and nonhumans as well as their own strangeness to both themselves and one another, and if that entanglement and strangeness are such that neither a human mastery of humans nor a human mastery of ‘Nature’ are able to be safely pursued, how could one reconfigure politics? If the project of human autonomy aimed to achieve a community of equals grounded on the right of every single human to reason freely, what kind of community lies ahead after the realisation that the only thing humans have in common with themselves and with nonhumans is their absolute strangeness to one another? Grounded in Jacques Rancière’s reconceptualisation of ‘policing’ and ‘politics,’ and aided by Deleuze and Guattari, Martin Heidegger, Peggy Phelan, Victor Turner, Roberto Esposito, and Emmanuel Lévinas, the final chapter of this thesis will open itself to a more ecological politics sustained by the absolute strangeness of all bodies, so that all humans and nonhumans can encounter one another in a more ethical fashion by never losing sight of the only thing they can be sure to have in common: their estrangement to one another.

Finally, the Conclusion will synthesise my contribution to knowledge by connecting the argument built in each chapter to the philosophical and political challenges posed by the Anthropocene.<sup>52</sup> The conclusion will also reflect on the ways this dissertation can add, even if only provisionally, to work already being done in Performance Studies and further the discipline’s already existing

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<sup>52</sup> The challenges posed by the Anthropocene will be presented and discussed in more detail in Chapter One below (pp. 66–68).

potential and willingness to engage with other fields of knowledge in an ecological fashion.

After the Conclusion, a small, performative section will be added as this thesis' Fugue: its an alternative ending. In it, the whole argument of this work will be summed up in a more poietic fashion, in line with the claims made on performative writing and metaphor in Chapter Three. Its aim will be that of capturing, even if only temporarily, even if only tangentially, the strangeness of the object of this study, a strangeness which the more academic sections of this dissertation will necessarily have failed to fully convey.

### **Arrival**

Situated at the intersection of Performance Studies, Philosophy, and Ecocriticism, this thesis will add to the work already done by scholars such as Jon McKenzie and Alan Read and propose a further opening up of performance to the nonhuman sphere as a response to the pressing ontological questions posed by the unfolding of the ecological crisis. With its claim that all encounters amongst all bodies, human and nonhuman, could be thought as performance, the thesis you hold in your hands will support a broader than broad spectrum of performance for an ecological world that will thereby once again emerge as *theatrum mundi*, albeit one where there will no longer be space for ontological exceptionalism of any kind, human or otherwise. In that way, this thesis will align itself with the strong history of Performance Studies scholarship concerning itself with the ethics of the encounter, as well as trying to expand on and adapt that work in light of the blurring of the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide and the 'nonhuman turn' of recent philosophical debates.

## — ONE —

**Correlationism and the Shock of the Anthropocene**

I see trees of green, red roses too  
 I see them bloom, for me and you  
 —Louis Armstrong<sup>1</sup>

(After the heathwaves: Heath Death, Entropy,  
 Absolute Zero...)  
 —Peter Reading<sup>2</sup>

**Setting the Scene**

On the 11th of March 2011, at exactly 14:46 JST, the Pacific Coast of Tōhoku in the Northeast of Honshu, Japan, was hit by the 9.0 magnitude-strong Great East Japan Earthquake. Immediately after the beginning of the seismic activity, the SCRAM or emergency shutdown system of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, located in the most affected coastal area, went into operation in Units 1, 2, and 3, which were active at the time.<sup>3</sup> However, due to the severity of the tremors, the electricity transmission between the Tokyo Electric Power Company Shinfukushima Transformer Substations and the Fukushima Plant was also damaged, resulting in a total loss of electricity and, as a consequence, in the automatic activation of the emergency diesel generators, which were responsible for powering the core cooling down process in the three active reactors.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, and as it is often the case, the disturbances in the oceanic crust led to the formation of a major tsunami which reached its peak at 15:37 JST. As if the damage caused by the earthquake hadn't already been enough,

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Armstrong, "What a Wonderful World," writ. Bob Thiele and George David Weiss, MP3 download (Universal-Island Records Ltd, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Reading, *-273.15* (Tartet: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Japan, NAIC, *The Official Report of The Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission* (Tokyo: The National Diet of Japan, 2012), 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the tsunami flooded and destroyed the emergency diesel generators of the nuclear power plant, along with its seawater cooling pumps, the electric wiring system, and the DC power supply for Units 1, 2, and 4. By the time the water had retreated, the site was powerless and covered in debris, and its monitoring equipment was left unresponsive.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the lack of electricity made it extremely difficult to cool down the reactors and the lack of access made it harder to bring in cooling alternatives such as fire trucks. As a result, a series of reactor core exposures and damages started at approximately 18:10 JST in Unit 1, followed by Unit 2 at 9:10 on the 13th of March, and Unit 3 at approximately 17:00 on the 14th. Those events led to hydrogen explosions at the Unit 1 building on the 12th of March, at Unit 3 on the 14th, and at Unit 4 on the 15th, followed by an explosion and mass discharge of radioactive material from Unit 2 also on the 15th.<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that a total of 900 PBq of radioactive substances was released, 1/6 of the emissions of the Chernobyl accident, leading the Japanese government to evacuate 146,520 people living within a 20 Km radius of the power plant, several foreign embassies to advise their citizens to evacuate areas extending as far as Tokyo, and the disaster to be rated 7—“Major Accident”—on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale.<sup>7</sup>

According to the World Nuclear Association, most radioactivity accumulated in the soil was due to the release of Caesium-137, an easily dispersible radionuclide with a 30-year half-life, which can contaminate land for some time and, due to its solubility, end up being consumed by humans.<sup>8</sup> In July 2011, data collected by the Japanese Government identified the presence of accumulated Caesium-137 at radioactivity levels ranging between 10 KBq and 3000 KBq/m<sup>2</sup> within a radius of 80 Km from the nuclear power plant.<sup>9</sup> Although

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Ibid., 34; Rama C. Hoetzlein, “Visual Communication in Times of Crisis: The Fukushima Nuclear Accident,” *Leonardo* 45, no. 2 (2012): 113; and “Fukushima Accident 2011,” World Nuclear Association, accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Safety-and-Security/Safety-of-Plants/Fukushima-Accident-2011/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Fukushima Accident 2011,” World Nuclear Association, accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Safety-and-Security/Safety-of-Plants/Fukushima-Accident-2011/>.

<sup>9</sup> NAIIC, *The Official Report of The Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission*, 40.

the levels of radioactivity were much lower than those released during the archetypical nuclear accident that was Chernobyl, and even if there is no consensus amongst experts on the long-term health effects of exposure to low radiation levels, Chernobyl has taught the world that the levels of radioactivity accumulated in mountain and forest areas do not naturally diminish for many decades, and that wildfires, floods, and other events, whether natural or not, can cause the contamination to spread even further.<sup>10</sup> Still, one cannot as yet know what long-term consequences will the radioactivity released during the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster have both on the humans that were exposed to it and on future human generations. And neither can one predict with absolute certainty how far will the it reach and for how long. Nevertheless, one thing is already certain amidst all that uncertainty: in June 2013, a paper was published by researchers at the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, presenting the outcomes of a series of physiological and genetic tests done to the *Zizeeria maha*, a pale grass blue species of butterfly common in Japan which, like all butterflies more generally, is used as an indicator species in the evaluation of environmental conditions. The results were clear: not only were mild morphological abnormalities found in 12.4% of the individuals caught in 7 localities near Fukushima in May 2011, but, perhaps most importantly, those abnormalities were then inherited by their second generation, which also presented a much higher overall rate of abnormalities at 33.5%.<sup>11</sup> What those results show is that, only two months after the Fukushima accident, the local ecosystems had already been forever changed as a result of the spread of artificial radionuclides.

#### Exterior. Nuclear Site.

In August 2011, soon after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, a video appeared on YouTube and quickly went viral. In it, a worker wearing full protection clothing was seen walking towards one of CCTV cameras of the power plant in the aftermath of the explosions and radioactive discharge. Carrying in his hand

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<sup>10</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See Atsuki Hiyama et al., "The biological impacts of the Fukushima nuclear accident on the pale grass blue butterfly." *Scientific Reports* 2, no. 570 (2012).

what appeared to be a smartphone streaming live the images captured by that particular CCTV camera, the worker used the live stream on his mobile device as a guide to position himself at the centre of the frame in the foreground of the image. Behind and besides him, the otherwise vegetal landscape was punctuated by metal pipes and vertical steel structures. As soon as the worker placed himself at the centre of the screen, he opened his right arm to the side and paused there, pointing to the site on which he stood. A few seconds later, he raised his arm up to the sky and then down again towards the front until his index finger was pointing towards the centre of the camera (Fig. 11).<sup>12</sup> As he stood there, his right index finger pointing at the camera, his left hand held his phone close to his face so he'd continue watching the live streaming. 20 minutes later, he left.



Fig. 11: Anonymous worker points a finger at a monitoring live camera, Fukushima 1 nuclear plant, 2011. Video still.

After the video went viral and started attracting the attention of internet users worldwide, of the media, and even of TEPCO—the Tokyo Electric Power Company—and the Japanese government, the mysterious worker reemerged in late 2011, this time with a a blog on which he published documentation and texts related to the now infamous video event. On the English version of that website, it is possible to find a diagram of the network through which the images captured on CCTV circulated (Fig. 12) alongside a series of photographs taken

<sup>12</sup> See “[検証動画] 作業員がカメラに指差し(ほぼ等倍: 前半) 1/2,” YouTube video, 14:49, posted by “fuku1live,” August 28, 2011. [http://youtu.be/t3g8L\\_7cTKM](http://youtu.be/t3g8L_7cTKM).

at the power plant, a text justifying the action, and what looks like a manifesto written in the form of a poem.<sup>13</sup>

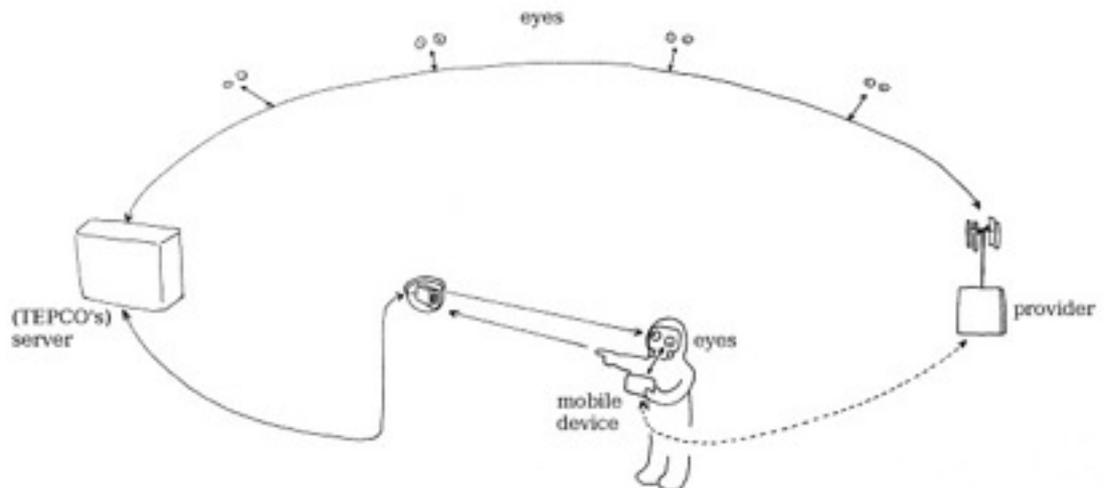


Fig. 12: Anon., diagram of the Fukushima CCTV network.

According to that online source, the still anonymous worker decided to make the video in order to draw attention to the precarious labour conditions at TEPCO, where workers allegedly had to work long hours in exchange for very low wages and had no insurance or proper contract documents, often being subcontracted through a vast network of agencies.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, his intention was to also draw attention to the position of the spectator who watched the disaster happening through television news reports, as well as to his own position as someone who had also followed the accident through the media.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, what is most relevant for the present argument, is the worker's acknowledgement that the video was a reenactment of Vito Acconci's 1971 work *Centers*, which he adapted to the site of the Fukushima nuclear crisis and the present global time of the Internet and closed-circuit surveillance systems.<sup>16</sup>

The worker's reference to Acconci became less of a surprise after March 2012, when Tokyo-based artist Kota Takeuchi announced his intention of including the

<sup>13</sup> See Anon., "About the Pointing a Finger Toward Fukushima live cam," accessed April 3, 2013, <http://pointatfuku1cam.nobody.jp/e.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Fukushima CCTV video in a solo exhibition he held in Japan's capital city.<sup>17</sup> Soon, all the speculation on the identity of the worker seemed to have turned into a safe degree of certainty. Although Takeuchi still refused to confirm he was the man pointing at the CCTV camera even after having announced the inclusion of the video in his solo show, the news stories ran by media titles such as *The Japan Times* seemed to leave little room for doubt: according to the newspaper not only was 29-year-old Takeuchi about the same height and build as the rogue Fukushima worker, but he had also admitted to having been working at the power plant at the time the video was shot.<sup>18</sup> Little room for doubt, then—the Fukushima CCTV YouTube video had now been officially recognised as a work of art.

With such qualifier grounding the visioning of the video and with its reassuring passage from the anonymity of the internet to the signed white walls of a Tokyo art space, a few questions arise: to what extent does the radioactive spatiotemporal context of Takeuchi's video add to, expand, or problematise the original gesture of Vito Acconci? In what way or ways does the viewing of a man pointing at himself pointing at the centre of a screen acquire a new set of possible readings when it is framed by the anxious clicks of a Geiger counter? What happens to Acconci's video when the man who reenacts it stands on the contaminated grounds of a nuclear disaster? Or, ultimately, if Acconci's *Centers* is agreed upon as symptomatic of twentieth-century narcissism, what can Takeuchi's video tell us about the conditions of our own ecological time?

### Interior. White Cube.

In 1971, Vito Acconci decided to sit for 20 minutes in front of a television connected to a video camera and film himself pointing at the centre of the screen that, in turn, fed back his own mirror-image, live, pointing at himself (Fig. 13).

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<sup>17</sup> See Edan Corkill, "Are we pointing at the right guy?," *The Japan Times*, March 8, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 13: Vito Acconci, *Centers*, 1971. Video still.

According to Rosalind Krauss, writing five years later in 1976, Acconci's work, a "sustained tautology: a line of sight that begins at Acconci's plane of vision and ends at the eyes of his projected double" is a paradigmatic example of the "narcissism so endemic to works of video."<sup>19</sup> It was because *Centers* revealed the human body bracketed from its environment by being caught within the feedback loop of a visual apparatus that was able to simultaneously record and transmit images, that Krauss used it as the ultimate example of video's underlying narcissism.

Whereas, in a nod to Clement Greenberg's modernist art criticism, Krauss saw established art forms such as painting, sculpture, or even film, defining themselves through the exploration of the material specificities of their particular medium—pigment-bearing surfaces for painting, matter in space for sculpture, and light projected through moving celluloid for film—in video work the artist was left surrounded only by him or herself, eventually collapsing the present through self-encapsulation, spatial closure, and self-reflection (Fig. 14).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976): 50.

<sup>20</sup> See Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 53–54.

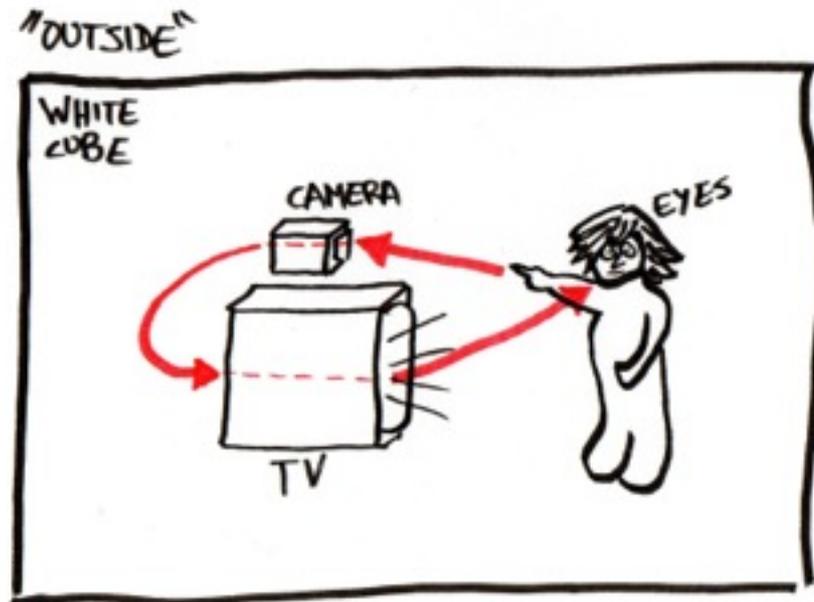


Fig. 14: Diagram of the narcissistic loop in Acconci's *Centers*.

Like the lake that reflects Narcissus' image back to himself, video was, for Krauss, revelatory of a self "split and doubled by the mirror-reflection of synchronous feedback."<sup>21</sup> Through its use of a mirroring apparatus, Acconci's work executed a movement towards the fusion of the artist with his own artwork. In Krauss' words:

The self and its reflected image are of course literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object. *Facing mirrors on opposite walls squeeze out the real space between them.*<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, the self-reflective tautology of video represented by *Centers* was a landmark instance of that centripetal collision in which the autonomy of an object was compromised by its continuous giving back of nothing other than the subject himself, something akin to the staging of the correlationist circle that, as it will now be seen, French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux identified as the crucial feature of the post-Kantian tradition of critical thought.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 56–57 (emphasis added).

## Correlationism: From Kant to Critical

In his 2008 book, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Quentin Meillassoux used the term “correlationism” to name the core principle of continental philosophy since Kant according to which only the correlation between thought and world is thinkable and never the world in itself. As he wrote:

[The] central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. [...]

Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object ‘in itself,’ in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object. [...]

[...] Thus one could say that up until Kant, one of the principal problems of philosophy was to think substance, while ever since Kant, it has consisted in trying to think the correlation. [...] The question is no longer ‘which is the proper substrate?’ but ‘which is the proper correlate?’<sup>23</sup>

Answering the question “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” in 1784 in the newspaper *Berlinische Monatschrift*, Kant famously started by stating that “[enlightenment] is man’s [*sic*] emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”<sup>24</sup>

Strongly grounded in his own philosophical project, Kant’s answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?” saw as the ultimate human task the pursuit of autonomy and the free public use of reason. For him, it was reason that, from the moment when it was woken up in the history of humankind, caused humans to overcome their animality and lead civilisation into a freer and more righteous

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<sup>23</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 5–6.

<sup>24</sup> Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 1.

future, through the realisation that they, themselves, were the “true end of nature.”<sup>25</sup>

However, because thought had its own limits, the Kantian project was not only a call for the progressive liberation of reason and, consequently, of humankind, but it was also, and because of that, a project of critique, of recognising the barriers which thought could not cross if it was to produce valid knowledge rather than dogmatism and illusion.<sup>26</sup>

It was there that Kant placed his own three *Critiques*. Widely recognised as landmarks of modern philosophy, Kant’s *Critiques* were written as a field guide for what was knowable and what was, instead, ungraspable. In line with that, one of their most important conclusions was that, because the mind is only able to grasp the world through appearances that are passed onto it by the senses, knowledge of ‘Nature’ is only valid as long as it is understood as knowledge of things *qua* objects of experience and not knowledge of things in themselves. In other words, because things in themselves are outside the mind and are only able to be judged once they have been converted into thoughts, thought is only ever able to think thought and never the things outside thought to which thought itself refers.<sup>27</sup> Given that time and space or, in other words, duration and extension, are a *priori* concepts of understanding that precede empirical reality, Kant defined his Transcendental Idealism as:

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<sup>25</sup> In Kant’s words:

“The fourth and last step which reason took, thereby raising man completely above animal society, was his (albeit obscure) realization that he is the true *end of nature*, and that nothing which lives on earth can compete with him in this respect. When he first said to the sheep ‘*the fleece which you ear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine*’ and took it from the sheep to wear it himself [...], he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased.” Immanuel Kant, “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” in *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, 94.

<sup>26</sup> As Michel Foucault put it:

“Kant in fact describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority; now it is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped. Illegitimate uses of reason are what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion; on the other hand, it is when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles that its autonomy can be assured.” Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 104.

<sup>27</sup> See Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 35–63.

[The] doctrine that all appearances are regarded as mere representations, not as things in themselves, and that space and time, therefore, are only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations given independently by themselves, or conditions of objects taken as things in themselves.<sup>28</sup>

As a consequence, it is possible to identify the formation of a double separation of humans from 'Nature' in Kantian philosophy. According to it, not only are humans separated from 'Nature' once through the development of their exclusive high mental faculties, but those mental faculties themselves, due to the conditions that must be in place for their correct operation, have also ended up producing a second kind of separation, this time a separation of thought from world-in-itself. It is that belief in a twice-enforced divide between humans and world that Meillassoux named "correlationism," a principle that grounds a great amount of work falling under the academic banner of critique in the Humanities, a dominant methodology of scholarly work that could be illustrated by Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge.

However, whilst the Kantian critical project passed through an identification of the limits which knowledge could not cross if indeed it was to remain valid, Foucault's work at the turn of the 21st century developed and eventually inverted the Kantian thesis of the finitude of knowledge. As Foucault wrote in his own answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?:"

[Criticism] is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so

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<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 342.

many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, unlike Kant whose aim was to use critique in order to map the limits of a necessarily finite knowledge, Foucault wanted to put critique at the service of a genealogy of the present able to demonstrate the historical contingency of all configurations of knowledge in order to then consider the possibility of future epistemological transgressions.

Critique, as it was defined thus far, can then be identified as one of the dominant paradigms in contemporary scholarly work. From feminist criticism to queer theory, from deconstruction to postcolonial theory, the critical ethos of the Humanities, much indebted to Foucault's work, has taken as its primary role to reflect upon the limits of human knowledge in order to understand how what is taken for granted is indeed produced at the level of discourse through complex articulations of power and knowledge. Foucault's critical project, as it was seen, was one that aimed to reveal how knowledge, rather than describing a stable and graspable exterior reality, is indeed responsible for its production. As Deleuze put it, in Foucault the "subject is a variable, or rather a set of variables of the statement. It is a function derived from the primitive function, or from the statement itself."<sup>30</sup>

By focusing on the performativity of knowledge, the critical project has sought to reveal how realities previously assumed to be universal are instead produced by knowledge itself. In other words, the aim of critique is that of revealing how, to quote Eve Sedgwick, "knowledge *does* rather than simply *is*."<sup>31</sup> To this primacy of the revelatory, Sedgwick gave the name "paranoid reading" and characterised it as a "hermeneutics of suspicion," a term the U.S. scholar

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 113–114.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), 47.

<sup>31</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

borrowed from Paul Ricoeur.<sup>32</sup> By privileging how knowledge performs the world rather than merely reflecting it, suspicion has taken over criticality, ultimately becoming an obstacle to its own project of separating the contingent from the universal. In other words, contemporary critique, in all its suspicion, ended up betraying itself by only allowing as certain the claim upon which critique itself depends for its own survival, i.e. the one that posits the historical contingency and performative nature of all knowledge. As Sedgwick asked, “*Always* historicize? What could have less to do with historicizing than the commanding, atemporal adverb ‘always’?”<sup>33</sup>

Sedgwick’s diagnosis of the state of contemporary critique is also shared by Bruno Latour. In the aftermath of 9/11 and as a response to the overwhelming proliferation of conspiracy theories pointing to ‘the real’ masterminds behind the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Latour wrote a piece for *Critical Inquiry* in which he examined the role critique had played in his own work and the ways in which uncritical suspicion had become the dominant feature of criticality. Giving as an example Jean Baudrillard’s claim that “the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight, [...] undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself,” Latour argued that critique had become synonym with “*instant revisionism*” and inundated both academia and the non-academic public sphere with more or less sophisticated conspiracy theories.<sup>34</sup> The problem is that whereas the critical enterprise had initially been concerned with disputing systems of belief such as those advocated by various religious doctrines and replacing them with scientifically validated facts, at the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 228. As the author explained:

“Let me be mean for a second. What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let’s say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu [...]? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troubling similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below” (ibid., 228–229).

start of the 21st century and there being no beliefs left to disprove, critique has now started targeting facts themselves, often by negating their existence or by turning them into a mere product of their dialectical counterpart, the observing human subject and its world-making language.<sup>35</sup>

The unfortunate outcome of that phenomenon is clear: whilst scholars focus on the correlate between human thought and nonhuman world, very real phenomena are having rather real consequences: global warming is happening, the Arctic ice cap is melting, natural resources are diminishing, sea levels are rising, and old and new pandemics are killing millions (unless one can pay to survive). The most obscene aspect of the unrestrained reign of critique is that, as Latour argued, it has gone from being a socially progressive enterprise to having become the weapon of choice of conservative rhetorics, one that is used to discredit everything from global warming to the causes of the 2008 banking crisis.<sup>36</sup> In short, widespread critique has been associated by scholars such as Latour with humanity's inability to act upon issues as pressing as persisting social inequalities or climate change.

Granted, such ethos of radical and widespread critique has brought undeniable benefits to human societies—from highlighting the nature of gender and ethnic inequalities to actively challenging the colonialist and Eurocentric structures of power that can still be seen in operation today. Nevertheless, it has done so at the expense of its being able to make claims about anything other than human knowledge itself: through its exclusive focus on relations of (human) power and (human) knowledge, critique has been unable to address anything beyond its human door step. In other words, because it has restricted itself to reflecting

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<sup>35</sup> This is how Latour put it:

“[...] I want to show that while the Enlightenment profited largely from the disposition of a very powerful descriptive tool, that of matters of fact, which were excellent for *debunking* quite a lot of beliefs, powers, and illusions, it found itself totally disarmed once matters of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus” (ibid., 232).

<sup>36</sup> As an example, in his essay for *Critical Inquiry*, Latour quoted the following *New York Times* editorial from the 15 of March, 2003:

“Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by man-made pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a Republican strategist] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that ‘the scientific debate is closing against us.’ His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete.

“‘Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,’ he writes, ‘their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the *lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue’” (ibid., 226).

upon the limits of human knowledge as a way of driving human emancipation and freedom, critical work has progressively lost contact with the reality of the nonhuman 'outside' against which humans defined themselves.

As a result of narratives of progress towards autonomy and of the split between 'Nature' and 'Culture,' humankind has become alienated from everything other than itself, living in a house of correlates, of mirrors that, as illustrated by Acconci's piece *Centers*, do nothing other than reflect back the certainty of the human. And so, the human pilgrims of emancipation and reason are left unable to grasp anything other than themselves: their qualities, their capacities, their politics, their beauty. Like Narcissus drowning in the lake, breathing in the water of its own reflection and still hoping for happiness ever after, humanity appears to keep on going until the day comes when, to paraphrase Peter Reading, after all the heat waves and all the heat deaths, it finally reaches absolute zero.<sup>37</sup>

### **The shock of the Anthropocene**

Driven by the pursuit of human autonomy grounded on the free use of reason, the critical ethos of post-Kantian thought cut off the knot that tied humans to nonhumans, eventually opening up the way for the exploitation of the latter by the former. The problem, however, was that such reckless exploitation of 'Nature' did not manage to put a stop to the exploitation of humans by humans nor to bring about the emancipation that Kant foresaw for all humankind. On the contrary, the exploitation of humans by humans has simply been shifted to the Global South, to those places that exist on the fringes of the 'civilised,' 'emancipated' world, where people live unaccounted for, uncared for, nonhumanly.

Similarly, in recent decades, humankind has been forced to recognise not the limits of its own knowledge that the critical project sought to reveal but, instead, the reality of its imminent catastrophic extinction, triggered by the unsustainability of the ongoing exploitation of the planet's resources, and driven by fantasies of teleological progress and unstoppable growth. As Latour wrote in *We Have Never Been Modern*:

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<sup>37</sup> See Peter Reading, *–273.15*, 1.

By seeking to reorient man's exploitation of man toward an exploitation of nature by man, capitalism magnified both beyond measure. The repressed returns, and with a vengeance: the multitudes that were supposed to be saved from death fall back into poverty by the hundreds of millions; nature, over which we were supposed to gain absolute mastery, dominates us in an equally global fashion, and threatens us all. It is a strange dialectic that turns the slave into man's owner and master, and that suddenly informs us that we have invented ecocides as well as large-scale famine.<sup>38</sup>

That is the shock of the Anthropocene, the time when the edges of the human-inflicted cut between 'Nature' and 'Culture' are finally sutured albeit at the expense of a large painful scar. The Anthropocene is a mark left in geological time, in the space that was once ripped open by the pursuit of human exceptionalism. In what could be seen as the planet's response to the dream of human emancipation, the Anthropocene on which humans now stand shows that 'Culture' and 'Nature' are closely entwined, and that every step humans take towards freedom and autonomy will eventually trigger feedback mechanisms that will only tie humans and nonhumans back together with increasingly stronger knots.

Whilst post-Kantian thought kept feeding dreams of a human existence twice split from nonhuman 'Nature' thanks to its mastery of reason and ethos of permanent critique, the thick layers of the Anthropocene were sedimenting under human feet, progressively and silently, to such an extent that, when humans became aware of them, their legs were already stuck too deep in the ground to allow for a successful escape. The Anthropocene has proved that emancipation is an impossible task in a world where everything is always already enmeshed in everything else, forming networks of bodies and environments from which no single thread can safely be removed without the danger of the whole fabric falling apart. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it rather concisely and beautifully, "[the] mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 208.

In that sense, the Anthropocene became the latest in a series of attacks on a long tradition of human exceptionalism that, according to Donna Haraway's reading of Freud via Derrida, started with the Copernican 'removal' of the Earth from the centre of the universe, moved on to Darwin's identification of the *homo sapiens* as simply one of many species, Freud's positing of the animalistic human unconscious, and Haraway's own hybridisation of organic matter and technology in the figure of the cyborg.<sup>40</sup> What is perhaps most interesting about all those wounds inflicted in the narcissistic flesh of humankind is that they were also products of the same ethos of critique that sustains the human exceptionalism against which they, in turn, have set themselves.

### **Walking on Thin Ice**

If one accepts that Acconci's *Centers* staged the narcissist loop of self-reflection that Kantian thought set up as condition of human emancipation, what can its reenactment on the site of a nuclear disaster tell about the human and its pursuit of autonomy at the beginning of the 21st Century? Whereas Acconci's use of closed circuit television foregrounded narcissism as the pathology driving the pursuit of human emancipation, could the re-staging of that gesture in 2011 in Fukushima have highlighted a different kind of condition, one that pointed to a humanity coming to terms with its responsibility over the ongoing ecological crisis?

Although at first both gestures seemed to trigger similar narcissistic loops, a few differences between the two works point to the significant gap between Acconci's original piece and its Fukushima reenactment. In Acconci's video, the frame was occupied exclusively by a close-up of the artist against a white wall, his face and pointing finger at the centre of the screen. In the Fukushima video, on the other hand, the human figure occupied only a small fraction of the frame and was surrounded by a very specific and identifiable environment, the Fukushima power plant. Whereas Acconci's work was filmed in the clinical, sanitised white cube of a generic art gallery, its reenactment in 2011 was

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<sup>40</sup> See Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 11–12; also Jacques Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?," in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 138–139.

captured by CCTV in the contaminated site of a nuclear disaster. If the image of Acconci dominated *Centers*, the radioactive landscape of Fukushima dominated its reenactment, eventually troubling the certainty of the human figure and its reassuring presence. Also, whereas Acconci's body was caught in the closed circuit of early video technology, framed by the camera on one side and by the television screen on the other, the existence of the Fukushima video was expanded in time and space, viralised thanks to the Internet and YouTube, able to be played in every single corner of the world at the same time, forever. In other words, whereas Acconci's loop only included the artist, the camera, the TV screen, and a very localised group of spectators (the ones watching the video in the gallery), the Fukushima reenactment, although also circular, by its being almost immediately uploaded onto YouTube, it was able to circulate in a much larger network, and thus to implicate individuals and geographies that could otherwise appear detached from Fukushima and from the clicks of its Geiger counters. Finally, one small but crucial difference separates Acconci's performance from its nuclear reenactment, a difference in the pointing gesture itself: as Fig. 15 highlights, whilst Acconci raised his arm upwards and forwards until it was pointing at the exact centre of the frame, the Fukushima worker initially raised his arm to the side, pointed to the site on which he stood, and only afterwards finalised the gesture by rotating his arm upwards along his side and then downwards along the front towards the centre of the frame, in a folding gesture that stressed the ecological enmeshment of Fukushima, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, 'green' nuclear energy, cesium-127, the worker himself, and all his viewers in the Internet age.



Fig. 15: Vito Acconci vs. the Fukushima worker.

Therefore, if *Centers* revealed the narcissism at the core of the Kantian correlate of thought and world, its reenactment in Fukushima replaced self-assuring human exceptionalism with the anxiety of a time when the project of human emancipation is discovered to have failed and an anthropogenic end of days suddenly appears unavoidable. Whilst *Centers* highlighted a humanity in love with the ideas of freedom and autonomy promised by the apparent certainty of its own mirror-image, the Anthropocene that literally grounded the Fukushima pointing gesture reminds humans of their imperfection, lack of autonomy, and inability to escape a global ecological disaster that is already ongoing. Progressively, all the reassurance of the correlationist circle started being replaced with the extinction anxiety of a species that is forced to face the prospect of its own self-obliteration.

## —TWO—

**Performance on the Anthropocenic Stage**

*Performance is an inclusive term.*  
—Richard Schechner<sup>1</sup>

*By their performances shall ye know them.*  
—Victor Turner<sup>2</sup>

So far, a scene has been set. Staged under the name ‘Anthropocene,’ it was broadly defined as the current epoch of deep geological time characterised by the affirmation and strengthening of humankind’s bond with the extended nonhuman sphere. The Anthropocene has reawakened humans to the continuity and interdependence of ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature,’ of humans and nonhumans. Having appeared at a time when humans are being forced to either address climate change or face extinction, the anthropocenic thesis has already started shaking the foundations of the civilisational project which has been set up around ideals of freedom and emancipation since Kant. By foregrounding the real and often catastrophic ecological consequences of reckless human action, the Anthropocene is forcing humankind to reconsider a future that must be shared with the wider nonhuman world. Whilst post-Kantian thought has been marked by the correlationist circle, thus feeding a civilisational project grounded on human exceptionalism, the Anthropocene troubles the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner’s statement to the planning committee of the 1981–82 World Conference on Ritual and Performance series, quoted in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, “Introduction,” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

certainty of freedom and autonomy as human *teloi* and proposes them, instead, as permanently unresolvable negotiations.

In line with the above, this chapter will open up some ways in which the ecological undoing of human exceptionalism and consequent blurring of the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide can affect existing theories of performance. In a time of crisis, how can performance survive the sinking of the grounds that have, for far too long, sustained the pursuit of human emancipation? If there is no longer a special and safe space for humanity in the world, how can that affect existing understandings of the place of humans in the histories of performance? Or, most importantly perhaps, at a time of deep ecological crisis, should performance theory rethink itself and its own scope in light of the inescapable enmeshment of humans and nonhumans both on- and off-stage and, therefore, venture beyond the realm of 'Culture' with which it has historically been mostly concerned?

Before answering those questions, it is important to start by examining the notion of performance from the moment it first was uttered in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to its paradigmatic development into a hybrid of *technē* and *epistemē* in Richard Schechner's "broad spectrum" approach.<sup>3</sup> In order to do so, this chapter will now follow the history of the term and of the ways in which it has been used by scholars working in a variety of projects with various academic and political agendas. As it develops and builds on existing literature, the chapter will become increasingly focused on how nonhumans such as animals and technological apparatuses have been featured in performance and its theorisation, the aim being to explore both existing and new configurations of performance and the ways in which that might respond to the blurring of nonhuman 'Nature' and human 'Culture.' As it progresses in its task, the chapter will eventually make a case for performance to be understood as the way in

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<sup>3</sup> Schechner's approach to performance will be presented in more detail in the following pages. For now it will suffice to say that, in his own words: "Performances occur in many different instances and kinds. Performance must be construed as a 'broad spectrum' or 'continuum' of *human* action ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet." Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 2 (emphasis added).

which all bodies, human and nonhuman, encounter one another whilst, nonetheless, remaining strangers to each other.

### **A Stroll along Performance’s “Broad Spectrum”**

What is performance? How can it contribute—if indeed it can contribute at all—to theories of knowledge production and dissemination, and present-day debates on the value, potentials and limitations—ethical, political, or otherwise—of the encounter between bodies? What is the relationship between what is performed and the material reality of bodies—bodies of performers and bodies of audiences? What are the defining features of communication systems—verbal, gestural, technological—once they are approached as *loci* of performance? How can performance take part, as a set of both theories and practices, in contemporary ontological and epistemological debates? How can performance be conducive to a better understanding of the relation between time and space and a body’s capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies? What does it mean to say “by means of performance”?<sup>4</sup>

Those are some of the questions with which Performance Studies has been concerned since the creation of the first academic department dedicated to the field at New York University in the early 1980s. According to Stephen Bottoms, the institutionalisation of the field as a discipline was a consequence of a series of field-defining essays written by Richard Schechner that started being published as early as 1962 in the *Tulane Drama Review*, and that were followed by the creation of Schechner’s The Performance Group in 1967 and the publication, ten years later in 1977, of the first edition of his *Performance Theory*.<sup>5</sup> However, despite being questions that have had centre-stage in Performance Studies since the 1980s, the above are still, in one way or another, the focus of this dissertation. The reasons for that are manifold and some have already been discussed in previous chapters. Further to the

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<sup>4</sup> As in the title of Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, eds., *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*.

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Bottoms, “The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpicking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy,” *Theatre Topics* 12, no. 2 (2003): 173–187. See also Richard Schechner, “TDR Comment,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 2 (1962): 8–9; and Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

ecological urgency addressed above, the concerns of this dissertation also stem from a feeling that Schechner's "broad spectrum" approach still has a lot more to give in terms of the various facets of the world that could benefit from being thought through and alongside performance. That, even despite the fact that performance has already become an everyday word, heard in every corner of the world from the black box of theatres and the white cube of galleries to the pages of financial broadsheets; from departments of human resources to studios of software development; from the polymer industry to, at an ever increasing rate, education policy. As Bonnie Marranca wrote in what could be an elegy to a time when performance only concerned the stuff serious actors did on stage:

After a century of hybridization in the arts, the concept of "performance" has come to the forefront of contemporary thought on art and culture. The word "performance," whether it describes a live event or personal acting out; or the features of a car, a perfume, a sound system; and whether it refers to economy or therapy or the act of mourning, performance now shapes contemporary thinking about people and things.<sup>6</sup>

However, regardless of all the human and nonhuman behaviours increasingly understood or even measured as performance—e.g., rituals of animal courtship, fluctuations of stock market indexes, dissemination of computer viruses, or Artificial Intelligence networks—the majority of work done in Performance Studies still appears primarily concerned with instances of cultural performance or, at best, with performances, human or otherwise, as long as they have humans as their audiences. In short, performance theory seems, at this initial stage at least, to have been mostly interested in thinking performance as performance 'for us,' in an attitude that appears incredibly close to the world's dependence on human thought identified by Quentin Meillassoux's in correlationist post-Kantian thought.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a way out of such seemingly human-centred paradigm towards a broader than broad understanding of what it means to perform in the ecological age and beyond the 'Nature'/'Culture'

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<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Marranca, "Performance, A Personal History," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 1 (2006): 3.

<sup>7</sup> See above, p. 60.

divide requires a revisiting of the history of—and possibly a readjustment of the existing discourses on—performance.

### **Performance: Transforming Humans**

According to Bert O. States and Mary Thomas Crane, “to perform,” originally meaning “to carry something out to completion,” wasn’t primarily associated with stage arts until the 17th century when, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Prospero asked Ariel “Hast thou, spirit,/Perform’d to point the tempest that I bade thee?”<sup>8</sup> As Crane noted,

Ariel has “performed” the tempest in the sense that he has brought it about [...].

The theatrical sense of “perform” grows out of the sense of the word meaning “to do, go through, or execute formally or solemnly (a duty, a public function, ceremony, or rite, a piece of music, a play, etc.).”<sup>9</sup>

A pioneering moment, Prospero’s question to Ariel already appeared to synthesise an understanding of performance that has been dominant to this day: performances are human activities that make things happen. The understanding that performance brings something into being has been one of the key postulates of performance theory since the 1960s, one which has guided the attention given by performance scholars to all sorts of productive human activities, from the visual and stage arts to ritual, from social and political activism to processes of identity formation. As Jon McKenzie wrote, echoing Schechner’s “broad spectrum:”

Performance studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that draws from the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts. It focuses on the pervasiveness of performance as a central element of *social and cultural life*, including not only theater and performance art, popular entertainments, microconstructions of ethnicity, race, class, sex, and gender, world fairs and shows and drag performance—potentially any

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<sup>8</sup> See Bert O. States, “Performance as Metaphor,” *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 1 (1996): 4; and Mary T. Crane, “What Was Performance?,” *Criticism* 43, no. 2 (2001): 172.

<sup>9</sup> Crane, “What Was Performance?,” 173.

instance of expressive behavior or cultural enactment. Within this field, performance entails the presentation or “reactualization” of symbolic systems through both living and mediated bodies.<sup>10</sup>

In order to better understand how performance came to be identified as such ubiquitous transformative affair, it is worth examining Schechner’s work in more detail for he, in Stephen Bottoms’ words, is one of the “founding fathers” of Performance Studies.<sup>11</sup>

### **Schechner: Performance vs. Theatre**

When, in 1962, Richard Schechner took up the role of editor of the *Tulane Drama Review*, his interests were shifting considerably “from theater to performance and from aesthetics to the social sciences.”<sup>12</sup> Such a change in focus was due to a variety of reasons but mostly a disappointment with the theatre productions seen at the time in the US in general and in New York in particular. As clearly stated in his first *TDR* editorial, his aim was to introduce “a new departure for TDR,” one that would “restore virginity to the theatre”.<sup>13</sup> In the following issue of the same journal, Schechner started to uncover the reasons why, in his view, theatre was in need of such a restoration: through his review of Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Schechner identified “a running sore in [American] theatre” and defined it, in a style not far from that of a manifesto, as follows:<sup>14</sup>

The American theatre, our theatre, is so hungry, so voracious, so corrupt, so morally blind, so perverse that *Virginia Woolf* is a success. I am outraged at a theatre and an audience that accepts as a masterpiece an

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<sup>10</sup> Jon McKenzie, “Performance Studies,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, eds. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 726 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Bottoms, “The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpicking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy,” 175.

<sup>12</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, ix.

<sup>13</sup> Schechner, “TDR Comment,” 8.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Schechner, “Who’s Afraid of Edward Albee?,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 3 (1963): 7.

insufferably long play with great pretensions that lacks intellectual size, emotional insight, and dramatic electricity. I'm tired of play-long "metaphors"—such as the illusory child of *Virginia Woolf*—which are neither philosophically, psychologically, nor poetically valid. I'm tired of plays that are badly plotted and turgidly written being excused by such palaver as 'organic unity' or 'inner form.' I'm tired of morbidity and sexual perversity which are there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre and audience. I'm tired of Albee.<sup>15</sup>

One issue later, and against the threat of the "running sore" that was an "impotent and homosexual," i.e. unproductive, American theatre, Schechner highlighted the alternative embodied in *The Play of Daniel*, a work the New York Pro Musica had staged at St. George's Episcopal Church during Christmas. It was in his review of that show that, according to Stephen Bottoms, Schechner first praised the efficacious enactment of reality that would eventually become a defining paradigm of Performance Studies.<sup>16</sup> Schechner wrote:

*The Play of Daniel* offers its audience [...] a theatre that is real in itself [...] a theatre which unblushingly says it is truth; not the intermediary of truth, but truth naked and alone. [...] Our theatre spins dizzily on the notion that all truth is hopelessly beyond our feelings, that art is some kind of collective bargaining with existence. [...] The author of *The Play of Daniel* refuses to compromise at the source; [he believes] in the efficacy of the theatrical act, in its holy truth.<sup>17</sup>

Schechner's attack on what he saw as an unproductive "homosexual" theatre, and his favouring of a theatre that somehow was able to effectively enact worlds, were certainly behind the increasing interest in performance as transformative behaviour that had progressively led him away from Theatre Studies and towards the Social Sciences. Aiding that move were recent developments in Sociology and Anthropology, born out of the work of Erving

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Bottoms, "The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpicking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy," 177–178.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Schechner, "Intentions, Problems, Proposals," *The Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 4 (1963): 5.

Goffman and Victor Turner, respectively, both of whom had started treating everyday human behaviour as performance.<sup>18</sup>

Such were the early days of what would, almost 20 years later, have become known as Performance Studies, a discipline concerned with the ritualised kinds of behaviour through which humans enact their social and cultural reality, a discipline not merely concerned with entertainment but with effective worldings and social transformation. In a way, an understanding very much in line with the etymological root of perform, i.e. *parformir*, Old French for “to do, carry out, finish, accomplish.”<sup>19</sup>

Another important ancestor of performance theory was John Langshaw Austin. Although Austin’s work was concerned with the particular case of words that, when uttered, are able to enact reality—therefore being closer to Philosophy of Language rather than Sociology or Anthropology—he did share Schechner’s privileging of doing over being and the latter’s distaste for what theatre seemed to stand for in the early 1960s. After having defined, in Lecture I of his 1962 collection of lectures *How To Do Things With Words*, “performative utterances” as utterances that do not describe reality but, rather, enact it—e.g., the “I do” of marriage—Austin was quick to clarify that those utterances responsible for enacting reality can never be uttered in the theatre:<sup>20</sup>

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such

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<sup>18</sup> Goffman and Turner’s influence is assumed by Schechner in his preface to the 2003 edition of *Performance Theory*:

“Taking a cue from Erving Goffman’s 1959 breakthrough book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, I sensed that performances in the broad sense of that word were coexistent with the human condition. Goffman did not propose that ‘all the world’s a stage,’ a notion which implies a kind of falseness or put on. What Goffman meant was that people were always involved in role-playing, in constructing and staging their multiple identities. By means of roles people enacted their personal and social realities on a day-to-day basis. [...] What Turner added was that these performances often took the form of rituals and social dramas” (Schechner, *Performance Theory*, ix–x).

<sup>19</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “perform,” accessed April 22, 2013, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=perform>.

<sup>20</sup> For Austin’s definition of “performative utterance,” see John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), 5–6.

circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration.<sup>21</sup>

The “hollow” language that Austin attributes to theatre—and here one cannot but notice the proximity between something that is “hollow,” devoid of core or seed, and something that is “infertile,” “impotent” or even “queer” as Eve Sedgwick and Andrew Parker have also noted in relation to Austin—resonates with Schechner’s characterisation of American theatre in the early 1960s as “impotent and homosexual.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps it was a mere coincidence that both Austin’s book and Schechner’s first *TDR* editorial came out in the same year, 1962. Or perhaps Schechner had had contact with Austin’s work earlier as the British philosopher of language had lectured at Harvard in 1955. Or, most probably, they were both independent symptoms of a certain anti-theatrical malaise that can be traced back in Western culture to Plato’s rejection of poetry and *mimesis* on the grounds that it only provided access to simulacra and never to the truth of pure forms.<sup>23</sup>

The similarities between Plato’s argument and the criticism directed at theatre by both Schechner and Austin are striking. In all three cases, the authors

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. A quick note on usage of terms: It is important to highlight that, “performative” is often used today, and after Austin, in an exclusively linguistic context as the name of those utterances that make realities. However, the term will be used throughout this dissertation as an adjective rather than a noun. In other words, “performative” will mean, here, a quality of anything that performs or enacts phenomena, as even Austin’s use of “performative utterance” implies—i.e., in “performative utterance,” “performative” is not a noun but a quality of a particular kind of utterances that are opposed, in Austin, to “constative utterances.” Therefore, every time the word “performative” appears in this dissertation, it should be understood as a qualifier of any body that has the ability to perform, rather than the proper name of a set of exclusively linguistic bodies.

<sup>22</sup> Schechner, “Intentions, Problems, Proposals,” 5. For Parker and Sedgwick’s criticism of Austin, see Andrew Parker and Eve K. Sedgwick, “Introduction: Performativity and Performance,” in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve K. Sedgwick (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Plato’s distaste for poetry and *mimesis* is most evident in Book X of *Republic*, when Socrates refers to the existence of three kinds of beds: the true bed-form made by god, the copies of the bed-form made by carpenters, and the copies of the carpenter’s beds made by artists. The bed made by the artist would be twice removed from the true bed-form. See Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1200–1203. For a historical account of the criticism that has been directed at theatre more or less consistently since Plato, see the reference book on the subject: Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1985).

appear to claim that only the presentation of supposedly true actions is able to enact some kind of revelatory transformation and, therefore, constitute true knowledge. And although Schechner appeared to progressively tone down his position between the early 1960s and his 1977 book *Performance Theory*, his interests have generally been on the side of human behaviours that are able to enact the world rather than merely representing it, something that is very much in accordance with the strong influence Victor Turner's work on ritual and social drama has had on him.<sup>24</sup> As he noted in his 1985 book *Between Theater and Anthropology*:

Either permanently as in initiation rites or temporarily as in aesthetic theater and trance dancing, performers—and sometimes spectators too—are changed by the activity of performing.<sup>25</sup>

Also telling of both Schechner's and Turner's privileging of human actions that do things rather than simply mimicking them is the series of conferences on theatre and ritual chaired by both scholars between 1981 and 1982 in Arizona and New York, and which was the precursor of what is today known as Performance Studies International.<sup>26</sup> In December 1980, and as part of his address to the planning committee of the conferences that were to follow, Turner claimed the following:

*Cultures* are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. [...] A performance is a dialectic of "flow," that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity," in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action," as they shape and

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<sup>24</sup> Schechner's more moderate later views are evidenced by a passage in *Performance Theory* concerning the perceived dichotomy between efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theatre, in which Schechner wrote the following:

"[efficacy] and entertainment are not so much opposed to each other; rather they form the poles of a continuum [...]. The basic polarity is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theater. [...] A performance is called theater or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances. If the performance's purpose is to effect transformations—to be efficacious—[...] the performance is a ritual. And vice versa [...]. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment." Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>26</sup> See Schechner and Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, 1.

explain behavior. *A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures.*<sup>27</sup>

From Turner's statement, it is possible to extract two ideas that would eventually become the most important pillars supporting Performance Studies as an independent academic field: 1) the view that performance is a kind of behaviour that is able to transform those involved in it, and 2) the belief that, in performance, there is no clear separation between action and awareness of action, i.e. between performer and audience.

One of the problems with such privileging of 'true' actions that, due to their transformative nature, are necessarily future-oriented, is that it is hard to separate it from a certain phallogocentrism and from the normative—read, heterosexist—paradigms of futurity famously attacked by Lee Edelman.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it must be noted in relation to Austin that his work has since been 'queered' by Judith Butler who has used his theory of performative utterances to support her claim that gender identity is performed through iteration and imitation, leading her to famously claim that "[all] gender is like drag," i.e. that being a woman is always the result of passing as a woman.<sup>29</sup>

With her equation of being with passing, a gap was opened between Butler's thesis of gender performativity and the work of Schechner and Austin: whereas, as it was seen, both Schechner and Austin had criticised theatre for its artifice and lack of truth, for Butler "'realness' is not exactly a category in which one competes" but, it is, rather, always a kind of make-believe.<sup>30</sup>

Still, what could at first look like a fundamental rift between Schechner and Butler on the possibility of 'realness' and truth in performance, was in fact somewhat bridged by a reorientation in Schechner's theory of performance.

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<sup>27</sup> Victor Turner quoted in Schechner and Appel, *By Means of Performance*, 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 85. See also Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 18–21.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 88.

Although, in the early 1960s, the author had posited performance, “truth naked and alone,” against theatre, “the intermediary of truth,” two decades later he appeared to have reconsidered his previous position.<sup>31</sup> As he wrote in the 1980s in what is closer to what would eventually become Butler’s thesis on gender and iterative imitation:

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. [...] The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. [...] Restored behavior is used in all kinds of performances from shamanism and exorcism to trance, from ritual to aesthetic dance and theater, from initiation rites to social dramas, from psychoanalysis to psychodrama and transactional analysis. In fact, *restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance*. [...] Because *the behavior is separate from those who are behaving*, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed.<sup>32</sup>

### **Phelan: Performance vs. Reproduction**

Like Schechner, Peggy Phelan has also occupied a prominent position in performance theory since the publication of her landmark 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. In her introduction to the book, Phelan claimed she wanted to

[examine] the implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power which have been a dominant force in cultural theory in the last ten years. [...] Employing psychoanalysis and feminist theories of representation, [she was] concerned with marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For the 1960s comments, see Schechner, *Intentions, Problems, Proposals*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 35–36 (emphases added).

<sup>33</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–2.

Blaming economies of representation for the “never totalizing” naming and ‘arresting’ of the other, and for their “[failure] to reproduce the real exactly,” Phelan famously claimed performance to be the only art form capable of opening up a space of resistance to representation.<sup>34</sup> As she put it:

Rather than living under the ideology of the visible, which is to say the phallogentric regime of a reproductive representational economy in which the Other is converted into the fetishized Same, the possibilities of the unproductive must be revalued. Performance, the genre of art in which disappearance (the failure of the given to be seen to remain fixed in arrested projection) is part of the aim of the work, must take a more central place than it currently holds in the landscape of contemporary representation.<sup>35</sup>

In Phelan’s view, performance is ephemeral and unable to be “saved, recorded, [or] documented.”<sup>36</sup> Performance can only exist for a limited period of time after which it has to vanish if it is to stay true to its ontology. “Without a copy,” Phelan wrote, “live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory,” thus refusing the economy of representations that characterises other art forms such as painting, photography or even theatre, and that is responsible for the ‘arrest’ of the body represented and of its meaning.<sup>37</sup> Hence, due to its unavoidable ephemeral nature, “[p]erformance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterwards” and, in doing so, it constitutes itself as a gesture of resistance to the production of commodifiable images.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 148. Here it is worth noting that the theatrical connotations of ‘representation’ are much stronger in Romance languages than in English: Whether in Portuguese (*representação*), French (*représentation*), Italian (*rappresentazione*), or Spanish (*representación*), ‘representation’ does not only mean standing for something or someone in visual art or in a court of law. Rather, ‘representation’ is also the name of what actors do on stage: in Romance languages, actors don’t ‘play’ roles, they ‘represent’ them.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 149.

Due to its stressing of the impossibility of performance ever happening again in the same way, Phelan's ontology could be seen to be diametrically opposed to Schechner's later definition of performance as restored behaviour. In other words, whereas Schechner claimed performance to be behaviour that happens again, Phelan defined it as that which can never be repeated.<sup>39</sup> However, after taking into consideration Schechner's earlier criticism of the artifice of theatre and his stressing of the transformative power of performance, one realises that Schechner and Phelan are much closer in their views than what would at first seem. Even if Schechner has abandoned his early straightforward rejection of mimetic representation and replaced that position—reminiscent of Phelan *avant la lettre*—with a view of performance as restored or repeated behaviour, he has never ceased to emphasise the transformative power of the latter.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Phelan has also stressed that performance has the power to transform both audiences and performers alike, a power that it shares with no other art form. In a 2003 interview, for instance, she was quoted saying the following:

Now we have streaming video, web casts, all sorts of media capable of recording and circulating live events. They can give us something that closely resembles the live event but they nonetheless remain something other than live performance. [...] [In] terms of the ontological question, it's simply not the same thing. For me, live performance remains an interesting art form because *it contains the possibility of both the actor and the spectator becoming transformed during the event's unfolding*.<sup>41</sup>

But what if there was a kind of spectator being overlooked in the case of recorded performances? What if Phelan, in her claiming that video recording is

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<sup>39</sup> The view that Phelan and Schechner are at odd with one another is echoed in Bert O. States' claim that "[whereas] the aesthetic of presence dominates Phelan's approach, the aesthetic of repetition dominates Schechner's contention that 'restored [or twice-behaved] behaviour is the main characteristic of performance.'" Bert O. States, "Performance as Metaphor," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 1 (1996): 13.

<sup>40</sup> On Schechner's stressing of performance as transformative behaviour, see: Schechner, "Intentions, Problems, Proposals," 6; Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 4; Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge), 233–235; Richard Schechner, "Foreword: Fundamentals of Performance Studies," in *Teaching Performance Studies*, eds. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), x; and Schechner and Appel, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>41</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (2003): 295 (emphasis added).

something other than live performance, ended up overlooking a particular spectator that witnessed the performance first-hand—and indeed was transformed by it—even before human audiences had the opportunity to watch it on screen? What if—let’s speculate—the video support, i.e. the film, tape, or memory card, was not only an actual spectator, but also one that succeeded, very much like the actors themselves, in being transformed by the performance encounter? Could one not claim in all seriousness that the memory card inside a video camera is as much transformed by a live event as humans are every time a performance piece is converted into electrical impulses fired between brain synapses? Would it be unreasonable to expand on the field-defining work of both Schechner and Phelan and claim, after Phelan, that performance plunges into visibility and disappears into *flash drive* memory? Or vice versa: could the liveness of performance be located in the moment human audiences witness the performance of the recorded video and its recalling of events past? Would it not be possible to assert, after Schechner, that technologically-restored behaviour is also an instance of performance? Or could performance not take place in the absence of humans, in the space-time of the encounter between an empty stage and the transformed memory card inside a camera left recording by accident? Or, even, could performance not take place in the space that separates the memories engraved on the surface of a DVD and their reenactment on a TV screen? Could performance understood as transformative behaviour not happen there, besides or even beyond the watching human eye/‘I’? After all, if it is possible to think technological performance, why is it hard to think machines that perform for one another?

### **McKenzie: Performance Beyond the Human**

The previous sections have drawn attention to how performance has been understood as transformative behaviour and to the ways in which its theorisation has primarily departed from instances of human cultural and social performance. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to its inheritance from Theatre Studies and Anthropology, Performance Studies, as carved by the likes of Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan, has mostly concerned itself with ritualised human behaviours and their ability to enact change. As Jon McKenzie

wrote in his controversial 2001 book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*:

Over the past five decades, the presentational forms associated with theatrical performance have been transformed into analytical tools, generalized across disciplinary fields, and reinstalled in diverse locations. Anthropologists and folklorists have studied the rituals of both indigenous and diasporic groups as performance, sociologists and communication researchers have analyzed the performance of social interactions and nonverbal communication, while cultural theorists have researched the everyday workings of race, gender, and sexual politics in terms of performance. [...] The concept of *performance as the embodied enactment of cultural forces* has not only informed many disciplines of study, it has also given rise to its own paradigm of knowledge, called in the United States and other English-speaking countries “Performance Studies.”<sup>42</sup>

As McKenzie’s quote sums up, performance has been primarily understood within Performance Studies and the Humanities at large as a transformative practice that has mostly to do with the realm of ‘Culture’ in its broadest, all-too-human, sense. The limit of such view, however, is not only that, in doing so, Performance Studies necessarily valorises transgressive or subversive social practices at the expense of other kinds of behaviours, but it also tends to ignore nonhuman performers and audiences.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Performance Studies appears to have been grounded on a clear ontological hierarchy, one in which only certain kinds of beings and certain types of behaviours are worthy of being addressed as performance. In other words, performance scholarship can often appear to take for granted J. L. Austin’s claim that “[actions] can only be performed by persons.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 8 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie gave examples of transgressive social events that performance studies tend to privilege, including “the happenings, rock concerts, and political demonstrations of the 1960s [and] the drag shows, raves, and Culture Wards of the 1990s” (Ibid., 30).

<sup>44</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 60.

However, what Jon McKenzie realised was that, as Performance Studies began its institutionalisation as an academic discipline and a paradigm for the study of 'Culture,' two other performance paradigms were being developed more or less simultaneously in post-war America and without any apparent contact with one another: the paradigms of Performance Management and Techno-Performance. Whilst scholars were beginning to use performance as a tool to think broader social and cultural phenomena, elsewhere performance was also displacing Taylorism as the dominant paradigm of organisational management, and starting to be used in relation to technology in the context of the military-industrial-academic complex of Cold War America.<sup>45</sup> Seeing the appearance of apparently unrelated discourses on cultural, organisational, and technological performance as a symptom of a bigger change taking place in post-war American society, McKenzie set himself to build a general theory of performance that was able to account for all those instantiations of performance and for what they might say about contemporary relations of power and knowledge. In doing so, he eventually claimed that if discipline, as theorised by Michel Foucault and embodied in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, represented the modern historical formation of power and knowledge aimed at producing a certain kind of subject through the complex interweaving of the discourses and practices of schools, hospitals, prisons, and the military, performance had taken over from discipline as the power-knowledge stratum sustaining the twenty-first century. In his words:

Like discipline, performance produces a new subject of knowledge, though one quite different from that produced under the regime of panoptic surveillance. Hyphenated identities, transgendered bodies, digital avatars, the Human Genome Project—these suggest that the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual. Similarly, performative objects are unstable rather than fixed, simulated rather than real. They do not occupy a single, "proper" place in knowledge; there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Instead, objects are produced and maintained through a variety of sociotechnical systems, over coded by many discourses, and situated in numerous sites of practice. While

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<sup>45</sup> McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 5–12.

disciplinary institutions and mechanisms forged Western Europe's industrial revolution and its system of colonial empires, those of performance are programming the circuits of our post-industrial, postcolonial world.<sup>46</sup>

The way that is done, according to McKenzie, is through the articulation of three challenges which are then addressed by the three different contemporary paradigms of performance: the challenge of *efficacy* in Performance Studies, the challenge of *efficiency* in Performance Management, and the challenge of *effectiveness* in Techno-Performance.

As it was already seen, thanks to the liminal model it borrowed from Victor Turner's work on ritual structures and then attached to quintessentially liminal genres like performance art, Performance Studies has dedicated itself to studying human behaviours and their *efficacy* in upholding or challenging societal arrangements.<sup>47</sup> More or less concurrently with the development of Performance Studies, and as a response to the inadequacy of the monolithic industrial machine of Taylorism in an increasingly informational economy, new models for managing workers started being developed. Those were supported by the emergence of Performance Management, a new set of practices and discourses aimed at measuring and maximising the ability of organisations to respond to the challenge of *efficiency*, i.e. of producing more whilst expending less, through fostering the creativity and initiative of their empowered and self-managed workforce.<sup>48</sup> Finally, in the context of the U.S. Space Programme and the Cold War, Techno-Performance emerged as a new paradigm of research aimed at maximising the *effectiveness* of technology developed by the military-industrial-academic complex; in other words, Techno-Performance became the set of practices and discourses aimed at measuring and maximising the ability of a technological apparatus to carry-out designated tasks to a given standard.<sup>49</sup> In McKenzie's words:

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.*, 29–53.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, 55–94. See also Sami Siegelbaum, "Business Casual: Flexibility in Contemporary Performance Art," *Art Journal* 72, no. 3 (2013): 49–63.

<sup>49</sup> See McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 95–126.

Cultural performance, as produced and studied by Performance Studies researchers, entails the embodiment of symbolic structures in living behavior and, crucially, the transformation of these structures through discourses and practices of transgression, resistance, and mutation. The challenge is thus one of social efficacy. Organizational performance, as designated and reviewed by Performance Management researchers, consists of tasks and strategies for maximizing an organization's output and minimising its input; these tasks and strategies are both human and technological. The challenge here is one of organizational efficiency. Technological performance, as engineered and evaluated by Techno-Performance researchers, refers to the behaviors and properties that technologies exhibit while executing specific tasks in specific contexts. Here the challenge is defined in terms of technical effectiveness.<sup>50</sup>

What McKenzie's study highlights, then, is 1) that all three performance paradigms appeared in the U.S. more or less simultaneously in the aftermath of the Second World War and proceeded to be taken up across the world; and 2) that all three of them, regardless of their particular contexts and histories, privilege process over product, structuration over structure, event over entity, and the testing and contesting of existing norms. In other words performance is defined across all three paradigms as a creative and dynamic event whether in Performance Studies' focus on liminality, Performance Management's call for "thinking outside the box" to maximise productivity, or Techno-Performance's investment in "risk-taking" and the "cutting-edge."<sup>51</sup>

In foregrounding the similarities between cultural, organisational, and technological notions of performance whilst nonetheless remaining aware of their differences, McKenzie brought human and nonhuman instances of performance together, therefore opening up performance theory to processes that may or may not take place within the confines of black boxes and white cubes. In doing so, he was able to foreground the importance of practices and discourses of performance for a more ecological understanding of an increasingly enmeshed world, where the actions of a body can often affect other

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 131–132.

bodies, be it humans troubling the configurations of the social, organisations affecting the behaviour of economies and the future of the Amazonian rainforest, or drones changing the ways in which friends are delivered their shopping and enemies are delivered their death. Nonetheless, by presenting efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness as the challenges of cultural, organisational, and technological performance respectively, McKenzie left untouched the perceived necessity of having humans as the ultimate arbiters of performance. Despite having brought human and nonhuman performers closer together, McKenzie kept humans as judges of the efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness of performance in line with the established view whereby performance only becomes performance through the human observer that legitimises it as such. Or, as Marvin Carlson put it:

Perhaps even more significantly, the task of judging the success of the performance (or even judging whether it *is* a performance) is [...] not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer. [...] This is why performance [...] can be and is applied frequently to non-human activity – TV adds speak interminably of the performance of various brands of automobiles, scientists of the performance of chemicals or metals under certain conditions. [...] *Performance is always performance for someone*, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self.<sup>52</sup>

### **Nonhumans in Performance Studies**

Even if, as Jon McKenzie has shown, Performance Studies researchers have mostly privileged the study of human behaviours that, through their liminality, are able to challenge and renegotiate the social order, nonhumans have always been active presences in cultural performance. As a result, there have been occasions in which, notwithstanding McKenzie's argument, scholars of cultural performance have had to look beyond the human in order to reflect on the nature of the theatre or to investigate the limits of the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide as it is either reinforced or troubled on stage. The aim of this section is to provide

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<sup>52</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 4–5 (emphasis added).

an account of those occasions, to highlight the long history of nonhumans in human performance, and to foreground some of the main questions surrounding the performances of animals and technology on human stages.

### Performing Animals

Animals have been present on human stages for millennia. From ancient Greek festivals to the Roman circus, animals have always been a regular feature of human entertainment. Writing in the late 1950s, for instance, P. D. Arnott noted that:

Animals on the stage are usually more trouble than they are worth, and producers are notoriously chary of using them. There are several instances in ancient drama, however, where they seem to be essential to the plot.<sup>53</sup>

From the horses that pulled the chariot from which Aeschylus made Agamemnon address the Chorus and Clytemnestra, to the donkey that carried Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, animals were used in both tragedy and comedy either in the name of spectacle or amusement.<sup>54</sup> In parallel with those, and according to Lourdes Orozco, the Egyptian and Minoan traditions of bullfights and staged hunts were also continued by the Greeks and became highly successful forms of popular entertainment in the Roman Empire.<sup>55</sup>

What is crucial, in the context of the argument that has unfolded so far, is that in pre-modern Western societies humans and animals were not so much seen detached from one another as they were presented in a relationship of co-defining proximity that had an effect in human cultural production. As John Berger noted in his essay "Why Look at Animals?," drawing on Homer's *Iliad* as an example:

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<sup>53</sup> P. D. Arnott, "Animals in the Greek Theatre," *Greece & Rome* 6, no. 2 (1959), 177.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 177–178.

<sup>55</sup> See Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre & Animals* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.

The *Iliad* is one of the earliest texts available to us, and in it the use of metaphor still reveals the proximity of man and animal, the proximity from which metaphor itself arose. Homer describes the death of a soldier on the battlefield and then the death of a horse. Both deaths are equally transparent to Homer's eyes, there is no more refraction in one case than the other.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, in the Middle Ages, that proximity was still very much a feature of everyday life. As Lourdes Orozco highlighted:

“[Animal-related] spectacles during [the Middle Ages] were at the intersection of performance events and daily life. Public executions, acts of shaming and punishment, animal baiting (carried out to soften the meat before its consumption) and staged hunts were all performed for both functional and entertainment purposes. Present in all of them, the animal enabled the crossing of boundaries, as these rituals fulfilled the practical and spiritual needs of the community.<sup>57</sup>

It was not until the scientific revolution and the Age of Enlightenment brought about the dawn of the modern world that the proximity between humans and animals gave way to an insurmountable divide that was also reflected in the theatre, where increasingly professionalisation and elevation of the form to new heights of human reflection on its exceptional condition, led the animal progressively off stage.<sup>58</sup>

One of the arguments surrounding the problem of having animals on the modern stage seems to have been that animals don't really belong there; animals cannot behave in a way capable of triggering the kind of existential reflection and cathartic experience humans expect from the 'high' thespian arts. As Nicholas Ridout wrote:

The theatre [...] is all about humans coming face to face with other humans [...]. The animal clearly has no place in such a communication. Thus when it does appear on stage, untethered from framings as a pet

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<sup>56</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 7.

<sup>57</sup> Orozco, *Theatre & Animals*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, 15; also Berger, *About Looking*, 9–12.

within the dramatic fiction, the animal seems doubly out of place. Not only shouldn't it be there, because it can't be in its own interests to be, but also it shouldn't be there because this particular kind of being there when it shouldn't is what we expect to find in the circus [...]. There is also a third sense in which it shouldn't be there, closely related to these two: it shouldn't be there because it doesn't know what to do there, is not capable of performing theatrically by engaging a human audience in experimental thinking about the conditions of their own humanity.<sup>59</sup>

Or, in the words of Nick Kaye:

[The] animal offers a presence that is disruptive of the representational apparatus of the theatre precisely because of its performative alertness yet inability to answer for its own symbolic significance.<sup>60</sup>

Away from the stage but still within the realm of Performance Studies, Richard Schechner has dedicated one chapter of his *Performance Theory* to ethology and opened his discussion of animal performance with a reference to Darwin's identification of a "continuity of behavior from animals to people."<sup>61</sup> Departing from an analysis of ritualistic behaviour in primates, Schechner eventually concluded that "[on] several levels human and animal performances converge and/or exist along a continuum" that manifests itself at different levels: structural, processual, technical, cultural, mimetic, and theoretical.<sup>62</sup>

However, rather than being exclusively triggered by an interest in the behaviour of primates, Schechner's reflections on animal performance were a means to a better understanding of its most evolved relative, human performance. As the author claimed from the viewpoint of a linear evolutionary paradigm, "[those] similarities and convergences offer a basis for re-examining human theater from

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<sup>59</sup> Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, 97–98. See also Lourdes Orozco, "'Never Work with Children and Animals': Risk, mistake and the real in performance," *Performance Research* 15, no. 2 (2010): 80–85.

<sup>60</sup> Nick Kaye, "Video Presence: Tony Oursler's Media Entities," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 1 (2008): 24–25.

<sup>61</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 235.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

the perspective of animal performances.”<sup>63</sup> For Schechner, therefore, animal performance seemed only worth of study for its contribution to unveiling something about humans and their higher forms of ritualised behaviour.<sup>64</sup> As he has claimed elsewhere:

A great difference between human and non-human performers is the ability of humans to lie and pretend... Although a few species specialize in ‘deceit’, most animal performances are automatically released, fixed and stereotyped. There is no irony, no pliable back-and-forth play between the role and the performer, no trilogical interaction linking performer to performer to spectator.<sup>65</sup>

Still, despite being either absent from most modern theatre or subjected to humans in many canonical works of Performance Studies, animals and animality have been embraced by avant-garde movements and contemporary performance artists as a political and aesthetic gesture aimed at disrupting the established conventions of theatre. From the slaughtered pigs in Herman Nitsch’s *Orgien Mysterien Theater* to the performing horses of French troupe Zingaro or the German shepherds used by Societas Raffaello Sanzio in *Inferno*, animals have been present in the works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists to stimulate a reflection on the co-dependence of human and animal subjectivities and to investigate and trouble the limits of theatre understood as human laboratory.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in that same line, contemporary performance scholars such as Lourdes Orozco, Alan Read, or Una Chaudhuri have tried to think the role of animals in theatre and performance through a study of its history and of the ways in which animals can disrupt the kind of recognition expected from the theatre since Aristotle and contribute to excavate

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Even almost twenty years later, Schechner’s take on animal performance changed little. Writing in 1993, he claimed that: “Nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees and gorillas behave in some respect very much like humans. Even if nonhuman primates cannot speak as humans do [...] they can express and communicated feelings. Such expressive behavior, communicating and sharing feelings, might be closer to human ritual and its associated ‘behavior arts’ (theatre, dance, music, some kinds of painting) than anything rational or cognitive the ‘higher apes’ are capable of” (Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, 229).

<sup>65</sup> Richard Schechner, quoted in Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*, 107.

<sup>66</sup> See Orozco, *Theatre and Animals*, 25–36; and Martin Puchner, “Performing the Open: Actors, Animals, Philosophers,” *TDR* 51, no 1 (2007): 21–32;

the grounds sustaining established architectures of the animal and the human as well as the ethics of their encounter.<sup>67</sup>

### Performing Technologies

Very much like animals, technological apparatuses have also been a regular presence in cultural performance at least since antiquity. From stage machinery to puppets, masks to digital interfaces, technology is as a ubiquitous feature of cultural performance as the humans with which it shares the stage.

In ancient Greek theatres, for instance, historians have identified two main types of technological stage apparatuses: the *ekklema*, a mobile platform that could be projected out towards the audience and often used to display corpses, and the *mechane*, a crane that was used to lift actors into the air to added spectacular effects.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, stage machinery or *ingegni* used during the Renaissance in Florentine religious festivals were mentioned in Giorgio Vasari's *Celebrated Lives of Architects, Sculptors, and Painters* and attributed by the early art historian to Filippo Brunelleschi and Francesco d'Angelo.<sup>69</sup> Similar mechanical apparatuses would then be perfected for seventeenth-century Venetian theatres and play an important part in Baroque opera.<sup>70</sup>

Likewise, there is written evidence of puppet and object theatre already taking place not only in classical Greece but also in much earlier Chinese, Arabic,

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<sup>67</sup> See Orozco, *Theatre & Animals*; Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement*; Una Chaudhuri, "Animal Geographies: Zooësis and the Space of Modern Drama," *Modern Drama* 46, no. 4 (2003): 646–662; and Una Chaudhuri, "(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance," *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 1 (2007): 8–20. It should be noted that, despite sharing similar concerns and even some theoretical and philosophical starting points with those works, this thesis is less concerned with exploring human-animal encounters than it is invested in sketching a general theory of performance that takes as its starting point the flatness of the real whose rediscovery was a side-effect of the ecological crisis. Rather than investigating the intersections of humans and animals in performance, the aim of this thesis is, as it was argued in the Introduction, to speculate on performance as such. For that reason, detailed discussions of the arguments put forward by scholars such as the ones just mentioned fall outside the scope of this work even if running parallel to it.

<sup>68</sup> See Graham Ley, *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 20–21.

<sup>69</sup> See Orville K. Larson, "Vasari's Descriptions of Stage Machinery," *Educational Theatre Journal* 9, no. 4 (1957): 287–299.

<sup>70</sup> See Orville K. Larson, "Giacomo Torelli, Sir Philip Skippon, and Stage Machinery for the Venetian Opera," *Theatre Journal* 32, no. 4 (1980): 448–457.

Indian, and Javanese cultures, where puppets were used in various contexts from secular entertainment to sacred rituals.<sup>71</sup> However, despite its long history, puppet theatre has often led a marginal, ‘underground’ life. As Kenneth Gross wrote,

Indeed, for much of its history, if it has not been seen as something primarily for children, puppet theater has often been taken for a lower order of theater, part of a world of unlicensed [*sic*] street performers, mountebanks, charlatans, and circus sideshows, a theater form that is debased, unsophisticated, unliterary, ephemeral, though also crudely seductive.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, for that same reason and very much like animal performance, puppet and object theatre has become a prolific arena for reflecting on and troubling the conventions of human theatre and performance. For that reason, both theorists and artists became increasingly interested in it from the nineteenth century onwards. From Kleist’s famous 1810 essay “On the Marionette Theatre” in which the author referred to a fictional conversation he had with a dancer in which the latter told him about how human dancers could learn a lot from marionettes, to Oskar Schlemmer’s 1929 piece *Metal Dance*, puppets, masks, and automata became a regular feature of thought and artistic practices invested in pushing boundaries and disrupting the norm.<sup>73</sup> As puppet historian John Bell wrote:

In the early decades of the 20th century, avantgarde practitioners such as F. T. Marinetti [...], Wassily Kandinsky [...], Fernand Léger [...], André Breton [...], and Oskar Schlemmer [...] valorized the performing object in three new ways: as an important link between European and non-European ritual performance; as a central aspect of traditional popular theatre with contemporary experimental possibilities; and, in a

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<sup>71</sup> See Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>73</sup> See Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theatre,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3 (1972): 22–26. For more on Oskar Schlemmer’s use of early technology in the context of the Bauhaus, see Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2007), 38–39, 44–45.

particularly new manner, as the central focus of what Léger called “machine aesthetics” [...].<sup>74</sup>

Whilst the use and theorisation of performing objects in theatre has been going on uninterruptedly, new digital technologies opened further possibilities for cultural performance.<sup>75</sup> In the words of Steve Dixon:

Digital performance is an extension of a continuing history of the adoption and adaptation of technologies to increase performance and visual art’s aesthetic effect and sense of spectacle, its emotional and sensorial impact, its play of meanings and symbolic associations, and its intellectual power.<sup>76</sup>

Still, technological performance should not be restricted to mechanical apparatuses such as puppets and stage machinery, digital objects like software applications and human-computer interfaces, or even photographic and video cameras or lighting systems. Similarly, it should not be reduced to the paradigm of what Jon McKenzie called Techno-Performance and its challenge of technical effectiveness.<sup>77</sup> Technology, in its Heideggerian sense, is a mode of occasioning, a way of doing so that what is done is brought-forth out of concealment into visibility; it is a mode of displaying, a doing that is also a showing and that always carries within it the potential for revelation and surprise, akin to that of an epiphanic moment. Therefore, technology cannot be exhausted by measures of its effectiveness for effectiveness can only account for how a particular apparatus meets preexisting expectations and responds to *a priori* human knowledge. As Heidegger put it:

Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth. [...] The word stems from the Greek.

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<sup>74</sup> John Bell, “Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century,” *TDR* 43, no. 3 (1999), 16.

<sup>75</sup> For more on the history of the use and theorisation of performing objects see *ibid.*, 15–27. For a genealogy of digital technology in performance, from the Bauhaus to Laurie Anderson, see Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 37–111.

<sup>76</sup> Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> See above, p. 89.

*Technikon* means that which belongs to *technē*. [...] *technē* [*sic*] is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*.<sup>78</sup>

Following Heidegger, then, technology implies a movement of actualisation that is akin to an instance of performance. Technology, like performance, makes something present. By stressing the similarities between both terms one is able to rethink the nature of performance and the possibility of its taking place in a world increasingly mediated by technology. Understanding performance as *technē*, as a bringing-forth or a giving-rise-to, means not only that performance can be seen as a way of making something present—in line with Peggy Phelan’s ontological work—but also that the making-present of performance will always happen by means of a carrier or a medium, as both Philip Auslander and Amelia Jones have claimed.<sup>79</sup> Performance as *technē* is, in that sense, a kind of giving-birth: it happens when “a content is articulated through a vehicle.”<sup>80</sup> As Phelan noted in response to Auslander’s claim that, when writing about Angelika Festa in *Unmarked*, Phelan didn’t seem to notice the presence of technology in Festa’s performance work:<sup>81</sup>

Of course I notice it, and I spent a long time talking about what’s on those monitors because I was not in any way trying to say that live performance cannot have video, audio, or technology. [...] Performance is a technology. Medieval theatre was a technology. It was not the new technology, not, say, electronic technology, but it was a technology: a plank and two boards, the definition of theatre. That’s a technology!<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 12–13.

<sup>79</sup> See Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146; Philip Auslander, “Unmarked: The Politics of Performance by Peggy Phelan,” *TDR* 84, no. 3 (1994): 186; and Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 12.

<sup>80</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 80.

<sup>81</sup> For Auslander’s criticism of Phelan’s reading of Festa’s work see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.

<sup>82</sup> Phelan, “Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart,” 295.

Thus, the progression of this dissertation towards a broader than broad spectrum of performance—one that will remain valid both within and beyond human experience—will depart from the aforementioned Heideggerian definition of *technē* in order to claim performance as the technology that allows all kinds of bodies, human and nonhuman, to encounter one another. As it unfolds, the political potential of such redefinition will become more evident. For now it will suffice to say that if performance, like *technē*, is a kind of unveiling, and if politics is, after Rancière, that which “makes visible what had no business being seen,” then performance is full of political potential, regardless of whoever or whatever is performing.<sup>83</sup> However, before delving into the political implications of the thesis being argued here, it is now time to argue how performance can account for the increasing ecological entanglement of bodies.

### **Performance as Communication**

In the introduction to his book *Story, Performance, and Event*, anthropologist Richard Bauman wrote the following:

Briefly stated, I understand performance as *a mode of communication*, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display. It is also offered for the enhancement of experience, through the present appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. [...] Viewed in these terms, *performance may be understood as the enactment of the poetic function*, the essence of spoken artistry.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3 (emphasis added).

Bauman's understanding of performance as a particular "mode of communication," one that constitutes an "enactment of the poetic function," is useful due to *poiēsis* being, in Plato like in Heidegger, a feature of a wide range of activities, one that is not exclusive of artistic practices or even of the broader human realm. As Diotima of Mantinea tells Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*:

Well, you know, for example, that 'poetry' has a very wide range. After all, everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry; and so all the creations of every craft and profession are themselves a kind of poetry, and everyone who practices a craft is a poet.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, performance understood as the enactment of *poiēsis* in its Platonic and Heideggerian sense already broadens performance beyond black boxes and white cubes and is, therefore, a good first step in the direction of the broad ecological definition of performance with which this chapter is concerned. There is, however, a problem: even if performance is, indeed, a poetic enactment, and if *poiēsis* can take place beyond the sphere of human 'Culture,' most instances of performance still don't appear as such; instead, they take place without being noticed. As an example, when using a computer, one does not need to become aware of the ways in which the machine performs for it to effectively respond to one's keyboard strokes or mouse clicks. For a computer to bring-forth the image of the text one is writing, for instance, it does not need to reveal the ways in which it carries out that task; on the contrary, most of the times the user is unaware of what goes on in the background.

However, before delving further into the details about those occasions in which performance appears as such, it is important to reflect on the first half of Bauman's definition, i.e. the thesis that performance is a mode of communication, and to ask whether communication can take place amongst nonhuman bodies.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to "communicate" means "to make [something] known, [...] to exchange information," whereas "communications" has a slightly different meaning, standing not for an action but for the series of

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<sup>85</sup> Plato, *Complete Works*, 488.

apparatuses associated with technology in advanced information societies, from traditional roads to information highways such as telephones, radios, and computers.<sup>86</sup>

Following the General Definition of Information (GDI), information, i.e. that which is exchanged in communication, must comply with three conditions in order to be classified as such:

GDI)  $\sigma$  is an instance of information, understood as semantic content, if and only if:

GDI.1)  $\sigma$  consists of  $n$  data, for  $n \geq 1$ ;

GDI.2) the data are *well formed* [i.e., they follow the rules of syntax shared by the emitter and the receptor of information];

GDI.3) the well-formed data are *meaningful* [i.e., their semantic content is able to be deciphered].<sup>87</sup>

From that general definition, it is possible to infer that to communicate, or to exchange information, is not a privilege of humans or even of animals. All kinds of bodies exchange well-formed information with one another and, in that sense, communicate: copies of the HIV virus, for instance, exchange information in the form of RNA with their host CD4 cells, information that is then transcribed into DNA and transported to the nucleus of the host cells where it is added to the cells' own genetic material, leading to the replication of the virus.

Another quite timely example of communication amongst non-animal bodies is the circulation of information in financial systems, networks through which value circulates and which, despite having been created by humans, can be said to have acquired an agency of their own thanks to the adoption of high-frequency algorithmic trading, much to the despair of the people affected by today's

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<sup>86</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 5th ed., s.v. "communication."

<sup>87</sup> Luciano Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21. Notwithstanding that definition, the definition of 'information' has a long and rather complex history, the discussion of which falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Thus, for an interesting and accessible explanation of that history, particularly as it unfolded during and in parallel with the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics of 1946–53 thanks to the likes of Claude Shannon, Norbert Wiener, or Donald MacKay, see, for instance, Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 50–83.

crumbling economies.<sup>88</sup> In information systems like contemporary financial markets what is left for humans is the role of analyst, of observer, of audience member as it were. Capitalism has become an autonomous machine, a network through which flows of information circulate in the form of capital and are received and processed not only by finance analysts and high street and online shoppers but also, at a time when thousands of financial operations are executed automatically every second without the intervention of human agents, by other nonhuman nodes of the machine.

Plants and animals communicate, too. Famous examples of such behaviours include the case of the male *Scenopoetes dentirostris*, a bird known for building extremely sophisticated and colourful structures that are then read as reproductive value by prospective female partners, an idiosyncratic characteristic that made the otherwise forgettable bird take centre stage in the philosophical discourse of Deleuze and Guattari, who called it a “complete artist.”<sup>89</sup> Or the case of some species of flowers predominant in Eurasia, South America, and Australia, that mimic female insects in order to be pollinated by the males that, fooled by delusion, pseudocopulate with them.<sup>90</sup> Or even those flowers that, by emitting smells that are read as pleasant by the human olfactory system, have encountered a way of striving as a species for humans themselves will make sure they won’t die.

All the above situations comply with the General Definition of Information: well-formed data (GDI.2) is produced as RNA, stock market indexes, colourful architectures made of leaves and found materials, or patterns, shapes and

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<sup>88</sup> As Geoffrey Rogow wrote in the Wall Street Journal blog *MarketBeat*, “The U.S. stock market has switched to automatic from manual transmission, forcing investors to relearn how to drive.” That is because “[the] majority of stock trades now originate with fully automated ‘high frequency’ funds [...that] employ no traders in the conventional sense. They employ no economists or chart trackers. Rather, programmers [...] outfit computers with strategies based on obscure mathematical correlations. Then the machines trade in and out of stocks at light speed without human intervention, a departure from the ‘fundamental’ investing model that dominated trading for the last century.” Geoffrey Rogow, “Rise of the (Market) Machines,” *MarketBeat* (blog), *The Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2009, <http://blogs.wsj.com/marketbeat/2009/06/19/rise-of-the-market-machines/>. See also Christopher Steiner, *Automate This: How Algorithms Came to Rule the World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 184.

<sup>90</sup> See Amots Dafni, “Mimicry and Deception in Pollination,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 15 (1984): 259–278.

smells of flowers. That coherent data is then read and converted into meaning (GDI.3) as instructions for producing a certain kind of viral protein, as financial tendencies and ‘mood’ of the markets, as indexes of reproductive value, or as female insects willing to copulate. Therefore, those examples reveal what Luciano Floridi described as the animated world resulting from the understanding that information is intrinsic to everything that exists and that its constant circulation is indeed the way through which all phenomena take place:

[In] advanced information societies, what we still experience as the world offline is bound to become a fully interactive and more responsive environment of wireless, pervasive, distributed, *a2a* (anything to anything) information processes, that works *a4a* (anywhere for anytime), in real time. Such a world will first gently invite us to understand it as something ‘a-live’ (artificially live). [...] This leads to a reconceptualization of our metaphysics in informational terms. [...] The infosphere will not be a virtual environment supported by a genuinely ‘material’ world behind; rather, it will be the world itself that will be increasingly interpreted and understood informationally, as part of the infosphere.<sup>91</sup>

Now, the question is the following: if the whole world, and not just the human world, can be understood in terms of exchanges of information, how do those instances of communication become poetic enactments and, therefore, performance? Furthermore, how does a communication-centred definition of performance relate to the work done in the broader field of performance theory by scholars such as Austin, Turner, Schechner, Butler, or Phelan? How can performance as exchange of information be reconciled with performance as enactment, efficacious transformation, and ephemeral encounter? In short, how does performance operate the Heideggerian bringing-forth of *poiēsis* amongst nonhumans while still remaining true or at least close to its existing ontologies?

Understanding communication as exchange of information is a relatively easy affair. There is also little doubt that it can be encountered, as it was already seen, in humans, animals, technology, and even in strange entities such as viruses, bodies that despite being classified as nonliving, become alive once

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<sup>91</sup> Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction*, 17.

they infect a host cell.<sup>92</sup> More difficult, perhaps, is to grasp how those exchanges of information amongst nonhumans can, as performative enactments, bring forth something that had not been there before.

In order to understand the above questions and, as a result, grasp the nature of performance beyond its familiar human manifestations, attention will now be paid to the work being done under the philosophical banner of Object-Oriented Ontology. Such a decision stems from the fact that both Object-Oriented Ontology and its umbrella field of Speculative Realism share some of the concerns of this dissertation, namely an interest in thinking the nonhuman in light of the current ecological crisis. Furthermore, the foundational gesture of Object-Oriented Ontology, i.e. Graham Harman's reading of Heidegger's tool analysis, holds in it the key for understanding not only how all bodies, human and nonhuman, encounter and communicate with one another, but also how all encounters enact ephemeral and contingent realities that, in that sense, are akin to performances.

### **Translating Bodies**

In the previous sections of this chapter an analogy was drawn between performance and communication by focusing on the former's poietic nature, its ability to bring things forth, to make them present. However, it is possible to argue that not all instances of communication are performance in a strict, poietic sense. As it is was made clear by Austin's separation of performative from constative utterances, not all utterances do things or bring realities forth; some merely describe realities that have already been enacted beforehand.<sup>93</sup> In other words, and in line with Bauman's definition quoted above, not all communication is an "enactment of the poetic function."<sup>94</sup> Saying "the sky is blue" is not the same as enacting blue sky in one's mouth. It seems, then, that for an exchange of information to become performance it must function differently and be responsible not for describing *a priori* bodies but for, somehow, enacting or

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<sup>92</sup> See Marc H. V. van Regenmortel and Brian W. J. Mahy, "Emerging Issues in Virus Taxonomy," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 10, no. 1 (2004): 8–13.

<sup>93</sup> See Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 5.

<sup>94</sup> See above, pp. 99–100.

actualising them as phenomena. In short, for performance to take place as effective creation or transformation, any body that is given to experience—regardless of its human or nonhuman, living or nonliving, nature—must be understood as movement, as something that is brought-forth every time it is encountered.

Claiming that bodies are always encountered through performance is not unheard of within the field of Performance Studies even despite the discipline's primary concern with time-based, (human) body-based art forms and social rituals. Schechner, himself, has made a similar claim in his foreword to the book *Teaching Performance Studies*:

In performance studies, texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture are not studied as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at by performance studies, they are studied “as” performances. That is, they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as “objects” or “things.”<sup>95</sup>

Such a privileging of the eventness and performance-like character of “objects” and “things”—i.e. nonhuman, nonliving, bodies—can be more clearly understood by looking at the ways in which “object” has been used in philosophy. In his book *A Hegel Dictionary*, Michael Inwood traced the history of the concept of object from its origin in the Latin *objectum* (past participle of *objicere*, “to throw before or over against”) to its use in Hegelian philosophy. According to Inwood, *Objekt* has been given the sense of “something *thrown* before, or over against, the mind” for the first time by German philosopher Christian Wolff.<sup>96</sup> Inwood proceeded to note that there is also a native German word for object, *Gegenstand*, “what stands over against.” Hegel used both terms and gave each a different meaning: while *Gegenstand* stood, in Hegel, for an intentional object, i.e. an object as it is given in experience, *Objekt* stood for an object which is, at least initially, independent from experience.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Schechner, “Foreword: Fundamentals of Performance Studies,” x.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1992), 203 (emphasis added).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

It is evident, then, that the etymology of both the Latin and the German words for object, *objectum* and *Gegenstand*, already implies that performance is that which allows for something to be qualified as an object—the performance of having it thrown against the mind, of having it *presented*. Presentation, philosopher of science Robert Crease noted, “is that dimension of performance which aims at achieving the presence of a phenomenon under one of its profiles.”<sup>98</sup> It is thus that, through presentation, performance creates a *theatron* understood as the theatrical space that both separates and co-implies bodies that spectate and bodies that are spectated.<sup>99</sup> In such a space, what is spectated, what is perceived by the mind are phenomena, i.e. informational translations of the spectated bodies.

A useful way of understanding such a *theatron* that performance opens up can be found in the recent metaphysical work of philosophers associated with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

OOO is a philosophical project initially developed by Graham Harman, first named as such in the title of a lecture given by him in September 1999 at Brunel University, and later expanded by Harman and several other thinkers, most notably Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, and Ian Bogost.<sup>100</sup>

As a branch of what is broadly called Speculative Realism (SR), OOO shares with other philosophical projects a rejection of the thought-world correlate that Meillassoux identified in Post-Kantian philosophy. As a result, it tries to

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<sup>98</sup> Robert P. Crease, *The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 103.

<sup>99</sup> In an attempt to bring together the various and often conflicting ways in which the term is used, Josette Féral claimed ‘theatricality’ to be the result of a spectator’s recognition of three important cleavages. First, the cleavage between everyday space and representational space or between ‘art’ and ‘life.’ Second, the cleavage between reality and fiction that takes place within the representational space and which can be defined as the separation between real actions happening on stage and that for which they stand in the theatrical fiction. Finally, the cleavage within the actor himself or, in other words, the separation between actor and role being played. See Josette Féral, “Foreword,” *SubStance* 31, no. 2&3 (2002): 3. Owing to Féral’s definition, ‘*theatron*’ will be used in this dissertation to name the space that is highlighted by each of those three cleavages, the space of the encounter.

<sup>100</sup> For the Brunel lecture, see Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Ropley: Zero Books, 2010), 93. See also Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

reengage with the real in itself. As Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman noted in the preface to their edited volume *The Speculative Turn*:

The works collected here are a speculative wager on the possible returns from a renewed attention to reality itself. In the face of the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divide between human and machine, there is a growing sense that previous philosophies are incapable of confronting these events.<sup>101</sup>

It was as a response to the state of affairs which, as Bruno Latour noted, has artificially split reality into three separate and impermeable sets—facts, discourse, and power—which, in turn, became the independent domains of study of Science, Philosophy, and Politics, that Speculative Realism constituted itself.<sup>102</sup>

However, despite sharing SR's concerns with the real and rejection of correlationism, OOO has its own particular set of premises and postulates, which have, in recent years, become extremely popular not only amongst a younger generation of philosophers and theorists, but also amongst artists and scientists.<sup>103</sup>

In line with new techno-scientific developments, Harman inaugurated OOO by departing from Heidegger's tool-analysis and Husserl's work on intentionality in order to bring the nonhuman world once again to the centre of philosophical debates. As he wrote:

Philosophy has gradually renounced its claim to have anything to do with the world itself. Fixated on the perilous leap between subject and object, it tells us nothing about the chasm that separates tree from root or ligament from bone. Forfeiting all comment on the realm of objects, it sets itself up as master of a single gap between self and world, where it

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<sup>101</sup> Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 3.

<sup>102</sup> See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> References to Graham Harman's work can, for instance, be found in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *dOCUMENTA (13): The Book of Books* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012); and Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (London: Sage, 2011).

holds court with a never-ending sequence of paradoxes, accusations, counter-charges, partisan gangs, excommunications, and alleged renaissances.<sup>104</sup>

Against philosophical fixations on the “leap between subject and object,” Harman went back to works by Heidegger and Husserl and expanded them with the help of ideas borrowed from thinkers as diverse as French and Islamic occasionalist philosophers (Malebranche, al-Ash’ari, and al-Ghazali), Ortega y Gasset, Xavier Zubiri, Manuel DeLanda, and Bruno Latour.<sup>105</sup>

The basic claim of OOO is a rather simple one: everything that there is is an “object;” humans, trees, dreams, unicorns, light, stock markets, viruses or capital, they all are equally “objects.” By “object,” Harman means any reality that is irreducible to its parts and that, because it always exceeds its givenness in experience, can’t be exhausted by its relations with other entities, therefore possessing autonomy and interiority.<sup>106</sup> In short, “object” means “a real thing apart from all foreign relations with the world, and apart from all domestic relations with its own pieces.”<sup>107</sup>

“Objects” are irreducible to relations because, like the tools in Heidegger’s tool-analysis, the primarily relationship one establishes with them lies not in knowing but in using them. In other words, what characterises Harman’s “objects” is that they are first and foremost ready-to-hand (*zuhanden* in Heidegger) rather than present-at-hand (*vorhanden*).<sup>108</sup> By that, Harman means that, after Heidegger, for tools to perform as expected their presence must somehow be concealed from view; their reality must, as it were, become invisible, unnoticed, independent from one’s access to it. It is only when tools break down that they are able to reveal themselves or, as Harman wrote, “[for] Heidegger, it is generally when equipment is *lacking* in some way that it emerges from its

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<sup>104</sup> Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 94.

<sup>105</sup> For more on Harman’s use of the work of those authors, see, for instance, Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 35, 160–163, 201, 204–206.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 187–188.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>108</sup> See Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, 96.

shadowy underground of pure competence and reveals its contours to view.”<sup>109</sup>  
 A computer is a great example of this: when it performs at its best, when it performs as expected, the computer itself disappears behind its smooth performance; one does not notice the screen but is, instead, able to direct one’s gaze beyond it, to whatever is projected there. It is only when the computer crashes down and freezes that it reappears as itself and no longer as an invisible window into a particular informational landscape.

Still, Harman’s most crucial gesture is not one of reinforcing Heidegger’s tool-analysis but, rather, one of extending its logic beyond the human uses of nonhuman tools. With Harman, the *zuhandenheit* character of the Heideggerian tool-being was extended to all kinds of bodies, human and nonhuman, living and nonliving so that *zuhandenheit* or, as he put it, withdrawnness from relations, became the first general postulate of his flat ontology. As he wrote:

[What] is of most interest is not the content of Heidegger’s self-understanding, but the unforeseen direction in which contemporary ontology is forced to travel as a result of his tool-analysis. [...] His insight into tool-being is a discovery that belongs to the ages, and is arguably the pivot point of twentieth century philosophy. [...] Heidegger’s tool-analysis should not be read as a limited account of human productive or technical activity. Instead, it turns out that with the theory of equipment Heidegger gives us an insight of overwhelming scope, one that cannot be restricted to “tools” in the narrow sense of the term, and ultimately cannot even be restricted to the sphere of human life. The discussion of tool-being provides us with nothing less than a metaphysics of reality [...].<sup>110</sup>

What Harman meant in this passage was that, through expanding Heidegger’s tool-analysis to all bodies or, as he called them, to all “objects,” one reaches the first principle of his Object-Oriented Ontology, i.e. that the being of all “objects” lies somewhere outside the relations they establish with other “objects.” In other

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 46.

words, that all “objects withdraw from relations” whether or not such relations involve humans or their nonhuman tools.<sup>111</sup>

In doing so, i.e. by claiming that 1) all bodies exist on the same ontological footing, that everything—from dreams to furniture, unicorns to supernovas—is *equally* an “object” and has reality to it, Harman was able to overcome the Kantian thought-world correlate by positing the real as *a priori* to thought. Nevertheless, by then claiming that “objects” cannot enter into relations, i.e. that they never make direct contact with one another, Harman still maintained a quasi-Kantian notion of epistemological finitude: if “objects” can never encounter one another, they can never grasp each another either. Therefore, instead of rejecting finitude, what Harman did was to strip it from its human exclusivity and extend it to all “objects” as their inability to fully encounter one another.<sup>112</sup>

Still, a question arises from such ontological claim: if indeed bodies or “objects” are always kept apart, always somehow withdrawn from the encounters in which they are supposed to be involved, how is it that they can still manage to relate to one another? How is causation still possible? The answer, according to Harman, is that “objects” relate to one another by proxy, through the mediating role of what he called “sensual objects” after Husserl.<sup>113</sup> Whereas “real objects” are autonomous from relations, their being or essence never fully exhausted, “sensual objects” are given in the phenomenal realm and are contingent on each particular encounter. As he put it:

Phenomenology cannot speak of how one object breaks or burns another, since this would deliver the world to the power of scientific explanation, which employs nothing but naturalistic theories. For Husserl, the only rigorous method is to describe how the world is given to consciousness prior to such theories. Philosophy becomes the study of

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<sup>111</sup> Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse II* (2007): 193.

<sup>112</sup> One of the criticisms that could be aimed at Harman’s position is that, in order to get rid of the anthropocentrism of the thought-world correlate, he is in fact anthropomorphising the world by injecting nonhuman-nonhuman relations with traits that are characteristic of human-world encounters. To that, Harman has responded by writing that “[rather] than anthropomorphizing the inanimate realm, I am morphing the human realm into a variant of the inanimate.” Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 212.

<sup>113</sup> Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 192–197.

phenomena, not real objects. But phenomena are objects nonetheless: in a new, ideal sense. For what we experience in perception is not disembodied qualities, as the empiricists hold; instead, we encounter a world broken up into chunks. [...] Note already that [Husserl's] sensual objects have a different fate from real ones. Whereas real zebras and lighthouses withdraw from direct access, their sensual counterparts do not withdraw in the least.<sup>114</sup>

In order to illustrate that point, one could take Goldsmiths as an example. When one enters Goldsmiths and walks along its corridors or attends lectures and seminars or even thinks about it, the reality of Goldsmiths is always more than the way it is experienced at any given moment. It is also always more than the sum of everybody's perceptions of it at any given time. That is because Goldsmiths, as an example of what Harman calls "real objects," always withdraws from relations. Therefore, what one experiences at any given time when crossing its doors, walking along its corridors, attending lectures and seminars, or even when thinking about it, is a third entity that acts as the proxy in that relation, i.e. the phenomenal or "sensual" translation of the "real object" that Goldsmiths is. Consequently, whereas a new "sensual" Goldsmiths is created in every encounter only to disappear as soon as that encounter comes to an end, the "real" Goldsmiths, on the other hand, remains unperturbed even if everybody would suddenly fall asleep, enter a coma, or if the whole world but Goldsmiths itself would collapse and relations of any kind would become, therefore, impossible.

As a result, what is important to stress and retain throughout this dissertation is that relationality, as it was conceived by Harman, opens up a *theatron* where, for the duration of the encounter, bodies meet to witness each other, even if what they witness is never the fullness of each other's being, i.e. Harman's "real

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 194.

object,” but only the contingent mediating roles they perform to one another, roles into which they have been *translated* in order to be read or to pass as.<sup>115</sup>

The notion of translation is of great importance here. Not only is translation a particular kind of mediated communication, but it has also been used by Harman himself to describe the transformative process through which his “sensual objects” come into being and take up their mediating role.<sup>116</sup>

Translation has also been used by performance theorists who have hinted at a similar process when describing the poietic nature of performance encounters. At the beginning of *Between Theater and Anthropology*, for instance, Schechner described a performance of the deer dance of the Arizona Yaqui as follows:

At the moments when the dancer is “not himself” and yet “not not himself,” his own identity, and that of the deer, is locatable only in the liminal areas of “characterization,” “representation,” “imitation,” “transportation,” and “transformation” [...]. All of these words say that performers can’t really say who they are.<sup>117</sup>

Another reference to processes of translation and their relationship to performance practices can be found in the following excerpt from Phelan’s *Unmarked*:

In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of “presence.” But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—

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<sup>115</sup> A note on terminology: although inspired by Harman’s work for its central thesis, this dissertation favours the use of ‘body’ rather than ‘object’ in order to designate, in line with Harman’s work, any entity that is irreducible to its parts and never exhausted by its relations—any entity that exists as a discrete unit. By using ‘body’ instead of ‘object,’ the aim is, first, to remain as much as possible within the established lexicon of Performance Studies, where ‘the body’ and its ability to affect and be affected are central concerns. Furthermore, ‘body’ is also more commonly associated with activity, agency, and performance than ‘object,’ normally associated with passivity and receptivity. At the same time, ‘body’ is broad enough to be used in relation to nonhuman or hybrid entities as demonstrated by expressions such as “the body of the text,” “the elephant’s body,” “full-bodied wine,” “body of work,” etc.

<sup>116</sup> For Harman’s use of ‘translation’ as the name for the mechanism through which “sensual objects” are produced and mediate all encounters between “real objects,” see Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 15, 208, 212; and Graham Harman, “Zero-person and the psyche,” in *Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millenium*, ed. David Skrbina (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 276.

<sup>117</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 4.

dance, movement, sound, character, “art.” [...] Performance uses the performer’s body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement.<sup>118</sup>

Following the postulates of OOO, and in resonance with existing work done from within Performance Studies, performance is not simply another name for communication or exchange of information. Instead, performance is an instance of the latter in which a body is translated into—and therefore enacted in—the phenomenal realm as a tangible but always incomplete version of itself. “Performance,” as Roger Scruton wrote in his *Aesthetics of Music*, “is the art of translating.”<sup>119</sup> In other words, performance takes place every time a body, human or nonhuman, is able to encounter another body by playing a role or a function. Performance is, therefore, what allows bodies to encounter one another and become visible as *personae* in the space of the *theatron*, even if such *personae* will always be ephemeral and contingent on each particular encounter.

To sum it all up, and as illustrated by Fig. 16 below, when two bodies (Performing Bodies  $\psi$  and  $\omega$  in the diagram) encounter one another, they never really overcome the distance that separates them, a distance that constitutes the *theatron* where bodies  $\psi$  and  $\omega$  face each other. Therefore, when encountering one another, neither of the two bodies is able to witness the other in full. Instead, what each of the two experiences is an encounter with an ephemeral translation of its counterpart, i.e. with the contingent role performed by the latter in that particular encounter (performed *personae*  $\psi'$  and  $\omega'$  in the diagram). As the diagram hopefully makes clear, the being of a performing body is always more than—and, therefore, never exhausted by—any of the phenomenal bodies or roles it might perform at any given instance.

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<sup>118</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 151.

<sup>119</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 441.

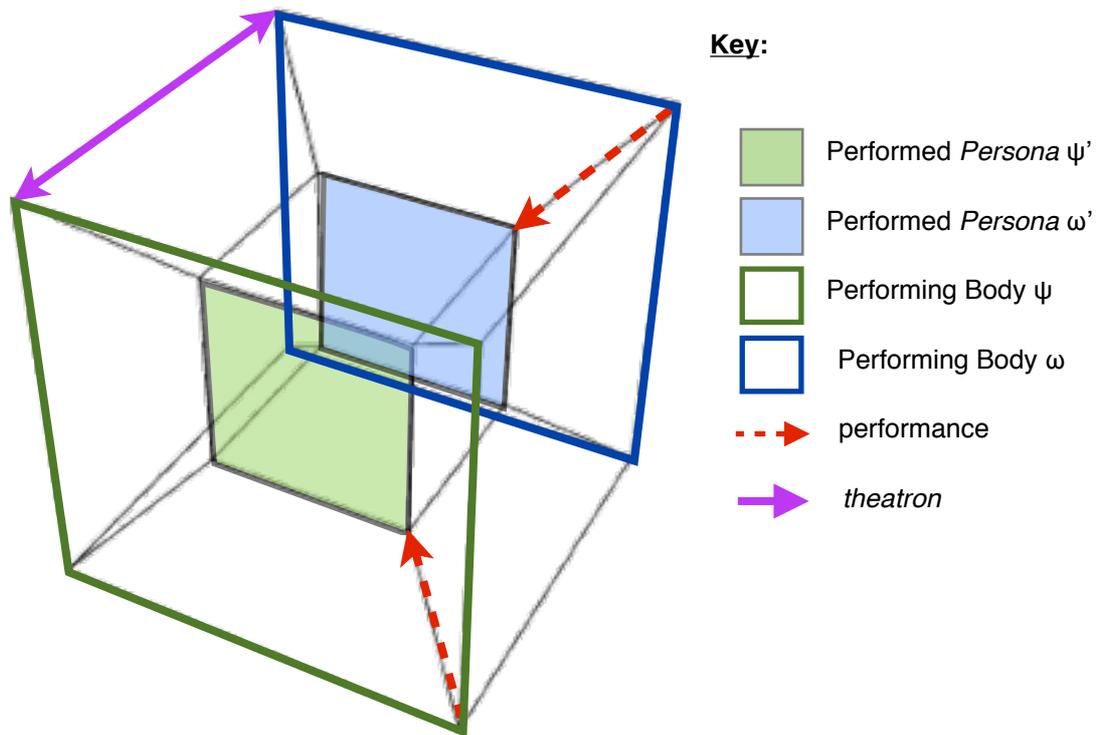


Fig. 16: Diagram of a performance encounter.

Still, if writing of a body's ability to 'witness' or 'experience' another body is fairly easy when referring to humans or even animals, the meaning of those terms becomes less certain once, along with 'performance,' it starts being used to describe events in which humans are not present, neither as performers nor as audiences. Thus, if the ecological age calls for a rethinking of performance beyond the human, one must briefly address the conditions under which nonhuman bodies are able to both perform and 'experience' or 'sense' one another. In short, one must tackle the issue of *psyche* in nonhuman encounters.

### **Performance, Translation, and Nonhuman *Psyche***

The question of *psyche* becomes crucial as soon as one posits that all bodies are capable not only of performance, i.e. of playing roles for one another, but also of 'experiencing' each other as such.

*Psyche* ( $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ ) was the Greek term for the substance responsible for providing bodies with life and it was personified in mythology as the lover of Eros. Already

in pre-Socratic philosophy, all kinds of bodies were considered to possess it.<sup>120</sup> *Psyche* was also the word chosen by the Greeks to translate the Hebrew *nephesh*, which was, in the Old Testament, the name of the individualised form that the principle of life assumed when breathed into a body by God himself.<sup>121</sup> In other words, *nephesh* is the Hebrew word for soul, that which animates bodies after these are filled with *rûaḥ*, i.e. Spirit or the breath of God.<sup>122</sup>

It is pertinent for the purpose of the present argument to note that *rûaḥ*, Spirit or the breath of God, is derived from a Hebrew root that means both 'to breathe' and 'to smell,' the same root from which 'smelling' was derived and, by consequence, also 'sensation' and 'sense perception.'<sup>123</sup> Therefore, there is a close relationship between *psyche* as that which animates things and *psyche* as a body's ability to experience or perceive, i.e. the capacity that a body has to encounter another body. Consequently, if, as it was claimed above, all beings are capable of performance, that is, of, triggering and experiencing the bringing-forth of each other as phenomenal *personae*, then here, like in Parmenides, *psyche* has to be a feature of all beings, human and nonhuman.

Such a panpsychist thesis has been dismissed since the Cartesian split of mind and matter made mind the only guarantor of the thinking human being.<sup>124</sup> However, in recent years, panpsychism has been revalued as a legitimate philosophical proposition. That was, in part, due to the fact that developments in particle physics, cybernetics and information technologies, have unveiled a world that is increasingly understood in terms of exchanges of information and,

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<sup>120</sup> E.g.: Thales attributed *psyche* to magnetic rocks due to their ability to move small metallic objects; Pythagoras concluded that everything had to somehow be intelligent as everything was derived from Number, another name for intelligence; Parmenides saw thought as an essential part of being and thus of all that exists; Anaxagoras claimed that the fundamental force in the cosmos was Mind; and Empedocles thought the universe was made of the four elements organised by two forces, attraction or 'Love' and repulsion or 'Strife.' See David Skrbina, "Panpsychism: An Overview," in *Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millenium*, ed. David Skrbina (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2009), 3–4.

<sup>121</sup> See Daniel Lys, "The Israelite Soul According to the LXX," *Vetus Testamentum* 16, no. 2 (1966): 184.

<sup>122</sup> See P. A. Nordell, "Old Testament Word-Studies: 2. Constituent Parts of Man," *The Old Testament Student* 8, no. 2 (1888): 50.

<sup>123</sup> See H. C. Ackerman, "The Nature of Spirit and its Bearing upon Inspiration," *The Biblical World* 53, no. 2 (1919): 146.

<sup>124</sup> See Skrbina, "Panpsychism: An Overview," 2. Also René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21.

therefore, led to a “reconceptualization of our metaphysics in informational terms.”<sup>125</sup> From the early theorists of cybernetic systems such as Norbert Wiener and Gregory Bateson to the quantum theories of David Bohm; from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory to Manuel DeLanda’s recent work on the emergence of synthetic reason, the notion of experience is being expanded and agency and volition are being considered as properties of both biotic and abiotic bodies understood primarily as informational networks.<sup>126</sup> As architect Keller Easterling put it:

We are not accustomed to the idea that non-human, inanimate objects possess agency and activity, just as we are not accustomed to the idea that they can carry information unless they are endowed with code/text-based information technologies. [...] Spaces and urban arrangements are usually treated as collections of objects or volumes, not as actors. Yet the organization itself is active. It is *doing* something, and changes in the organization constitute information. Even so, the idea that information is carried in *activity*, or what we might call active form, must still struggle against many powerful habits of mind.<sup>127</sup>

One of the authors more commonly associated with panpsychism or, at least, with attempts at demonstrating that *psyche* is not only present in humans, was Gregory Bateson. In his famous 1970 lecture “Form, Substance, and Difference,” Bateson called for a heterodoxy of mind under the light of recent discoveries in cybernetics, systems theory, and information theory.<sup>128</sup> In order to reach a definition of mind in line with such discoveries, Bateson famously

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<sup>125</sup> Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction*, 17.

<sup>126</sup> See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1965); Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Northvale and London: Jason Aronson, 1987); David Bohm, “A New Theory of the Relationship of Mind and Matter,” *Philosophical Psychology* 3, no. 2&3 (1990): 271–286; David Bohm, *On Creativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>127</sup> Keller Easterling, “An Internet of Things,” *e-flux* 31 (2012), accessed May 23, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/an-internet-of-things/>.

<sup>128</sup> See Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, 319.

redefined information as “*a difference which makes a difference.*”<sup>129</sup> By ‘difference,’ Bateson meant that which “gets onto the map from the territory.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, ‘difference,’ for Bateson, was akin to what Harman claimed to be the vicarious way in which objects are able to relate to one another. That is, information or difference is the phenomenal manifestation of a body which is never equal to the real body to which it refers, which it translates. In other words, if one considers Harman’s “real object” to be Bateson’s “territory,” the “sensual object” of the former is the “map” of the latter, whereby the map is a translation of the territory and never the territory in-itself. The real territory always withdraws from the encounter and, therefore, can only communicate itself through the presence of a vicar, its phenomenal proxy, its map. As Bateson claimed:

The territory never gets in at all. The territory is *Ding an sich* [thing-in-itself] and you can’t do anything with it. Always the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps of maps, at infinitum. All “phenomena” are literally appearances.<sup>131</sup>

Therefore, maps or phenomenal bodies are always traces of distant territories. Those traces can, in a very elementary level and without having to depend on consciousness or even biological life, be read by all kinds of beings, human and nonhuman. To that most basic circuitry responsible for the exchange of differences or of information, Bateson called the “simplest unit of mind:”

Consider a tree and a man and an axe. We observe that the axe flies through the air and makes certain sorts of gashes in a pre-existing cut in the side of the tree. If now we want to explain this set of phenomena, we shall be concerned with differences in the cut face of the tree, differences in the retina of the man, differences in his central nervous system, differences in his efferent neural messages, differences in the behavior of his muscles, differences in how the axe flies, to the differences which the axe then makes on the face of the tree. [...] This is the elementary cybernetic thought. The elementary cybernetic system with its messages

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 322.

in circuit is, in fact, the simplest unit of mind: and the trans-form of a difference traveling in a circuit is the elementary idea.<sup>132</sup>

Bateson's use of the tree, the man, and the axe as an example of a unit of mind can also be read as an occasion in which, after Harman, bodies communicate with one another through the presence of a phenomenal proxy. In other words, when the axe enters into a relation with the tree, the phenomenal version of the axe that is 'perceived' by the tree is related only to the shape of its blade and its ability to effect a cut, the cut being the difference the axe leaves on the trunk of the tree. Now, it is obvious that the axe can not be reduced to the cut it makes and, therefore, the tree's 'experience' of the axe does not exhaust its full being: the real axe is always more than any cut it might make. Similarly, the man holding the axe cannot, by the simple fact that he is holding it, experience the axe in the same way that the tree does, for the way the axe presents itself to the man is different from the way it presents itself to the tree; in other words, the information exchanged between blade and trunk is different from the one exchanged between—say—handle and hand. The tree cannot perceive the shape or texture of the axe's handle nor can the man holding the axe perceive its blade in the way the tree does. In short, a different map of the axe is provided depending on the contingencies of each encounter. Still, both maps are valid, albeit incomplete, phenomenal translations of the same axe.

A similar conclusion was reached by quantum physicist David Bohm in his essay "A New Theory of the Relationship of Mind and Matter." In that essay, Bohm used quantum theory to reject both Newtonian physics and the Cartesian move. In order to do so, and departing, amongst other premisses, from Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Bohm introduced the notion of 'wholeness' to mean that:

[In] an observation carried out to a quantum theoretical level of accuracy, the observing apparatus and the observed system cannot be regarded as separate. Rather, each participates in the other to such an extent that it is not possible to attribute the observed result of their interaction unambiguously to the observed system alone.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 324–325.

<sup>133</sup> Bohm, "A New Theory of the Relationship of Mind and Matter," 275.

By ‘participation,’ Bohm meant that both observing apparatus and observed system exchange “active information,” that is, not information understood as the mere description of the state of a particle, but observation as the gathering of data that in-forms, i.e. that gives perceivable or phenomenal form to the observed system.<sup>134</sup> It was in its sense of active in-formation that Bohm saw participation as the primary quality of mind, a quality that the quantum physicist and philosopher also claimed to exist, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, at all levels of organisation of matter:

It is thus implied that in some sense a rudimentary mind-like quality is present even at the level of particle physics, and that as we go to subtler levels, this mind-like quality becomes stronger and more developed. Each kind and level of mind may have a relative autonomy and stability. One may then describe the essential mode of relationship of all these as *participation*, recalling that this word has two basic meanings, to *partake of*, and to *take part in*.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 279–283.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 283–284. It is also important to note that the thesis whereby observer and observed systems in-form one another also resonates with Donna Haraway’s thesis, put forward in *When Species Meet*, that “[the] partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with [...]” (Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 17). Still, although according to the argument unfolded thus far it is true that the way bodies appear to one another, the way they translate themselves into the phenomenal realm, is contingent on each particular encounter, there is nonetheless something in each of those bodies that survives each encounter, something that, in philosophy, has often been called ‘essence’ or ‘*eidos*.’ In other words, there will always exist a reality to bodies beyond how they appear to one another. That seems to be what recent developments in theoretical physics and philosophy of science appear to point towards: that the uncertainty principle identified by Heisenberg in the complementary variables position and momentum of particles is neither due to quantum systems being ‘contextual,’ that is, dependent on an ‘observer effect’ as it was defended by the so-called Copenhagen Interpretation, nor is it due to quantum physics being an incomplete theory that will have to be perfected in the future, as it was defended by Einstein. Rather, the indeterminacy of certain quantum measurements has only to do with the fact that bodies are entities expanded in space-time and that, because of that, any encounter with a body is always a throw of a die in which the die can only manifest one of its faces or, in the terms of this dissertation, it can only perform one of its *personae*. Therefore, according to quantum physicist and philosopher Gabriel Catren, quantum mechanics is, in fact, the only complete theory of the real, one that remains valid at both micro- and macro-scales of the universe. In Catren’s words:

“Indeed, the uncertainty principle is nothing but a signature of the intertwining between the invariant *eidos* that defines an object and its experimental phenomenalisation [what, here, is being called ‘performance’]. If the momentum  $p$  is an objective property of an object, then the position  $q$  is necessarily, like the face of a die, a phase with no objective value. In consequence, the classical description of physical objects, which includes both  $q$  and  $p$ , is overdetermined. This means that in classical mechanics non-objective properties are wrongly considered objective. We can thus conclude that, *unlike classical mechanics*, quantum mechanics describes all the intrinsic object properties of observer-independent objects. Gabriel Catren, “A Throw of the Quantum Dice Will Never Abolish the Copernican Revolution,” *Collapse V: The Copernican Imperative* (2009): 498.

Participation is also a notion that has been widely discussed in Performance Studies since its inception: participation is a way of taking part, a way of collectively giving form to something. Participation is, therefore, agency. In a way that resembled Bohm's highlighting of the co-dependency of observing apparatus and observed phenomenon, Richard Schechner has also noted performance's dependence on both audiences and performers by stating that:

Inclusion and participation are not metaphors; they are concrete physical acts of the body. [...] without the audience's collaboration no performance is possible. [...Performers and audiences] meet each other on equal terms.<sup>136</sup>

Therefore, what one gathers from Bateson and Bohm, are understandings of *psyche* or mind operating as performance at different levels of the real, from the subatomic particles of Bohm to the macroscopic level of ecosystemic analysis led by Bateson. Even if one accepts that conscious mind is a property only of highly developed systems such as the human brain, that fact does not preclude rudimentary mind-like structures from existing at other levels of the real, from electrons to supernovas. If mind or psyche is that which animates the world by allowing undeterminable bodies to be translated into perceivable but yet contingent phenomena which are, in turn, read as maps of an inaccessible territory, then this elementary unit of cybernetic circuitry can be found in all kinds of encounters between bodies, independently of the level of reality which they occupy—from strings and particles to solar systems and galaxies. It is only in that way that performance as poietic communication or phenomenal translation implies a panpsychist position; not through extending consciousness or even self-awareness to nonhuman and abiotic bodies. Consciousness and self-awareness are properties that emerge at higher levels of complexity such as the ones behind the human brain. Nevertheless, the basic units of mind are still distributed through the entirety of the universe and are the structures which allow for performance as it is being understood here to be democratised into what can be seen as the mode of all encounters.

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<sup>136</sup> Richard Schechner, "Audience Participation," *The Drama Review: TDR* 15, no. 3 (1971): 73–75.

There are, however, occasions of performance in which, to use Bauman's terms, performance is displayed as such, therefore triggering the realisation that performed *personae* and performing bodies are not one and the same thing: the phenomenal translation is always a mistranslation that can never replace its original, whatever and wherever it might be. In those special occasions, often called "art" when they take place in the sphere of human 'Culture,' performance is able to foreground the theatrical space that separates bodies from one another and, therefore, to highlight its own contingency and the impossibility of bodies ever becoming fully exhausted by the *personae* they perform. When that happens, whether in human or nonhuman realms, previously familiar bodies suddenly emerge as distant strangers.

### **Encountering Strangers**

In the previous sections of this chapter, performance, in both its human and nonhuman forms, has been understood as a particular kind of communicative encounter, one in which a body enacts a role that is then experienced by another body. In such a world deprived of ontological hierarchies, performance is the way in which bodies are able to become enmeshed in one another despite remaining unable to make direct contact. The way they do so is through bringing forth one of their ephemeral *personae* that is performed in the phenomenal world of whichever body they encounter.

As a consequence, such an understanding of performance also implies that all bodies, human and nonhuman, must possess mind-like structures, even if only rudimentary ones, if they are indeed expected to take an active part in performative encounters as either performers or audiences. However, saying that a stone standing on top of an iced lake or a computer responding to a certain pattern of electrical impulses are the same kind of encounters one experiences in black boxes or white cubes is not the same as claiming that the bodies involved in them are encountered in the same way. Stating that all relations between all kinds of bodies are instances of performance is not the same as implying that a tree trunk encounters an axe in the same way that a human encounters Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* or Kira O'Reilly's *Stair Falling*. Although all encounters are poietic and, therefore, performative in the sense

that they all enact or bring-forth something that was not present, not all performances provide the same level of access to the body of the performer. Even if all occasions of performance are equally responsible for enacting worlds, sometimes the knowledge they convey of the bodies involved in them is of a totally different kind. At those times, performance is hyperbolised and reveals itself as such, therefore foregrounding the *theatron* on which it takes place. In doing so, it is able to highlight the inaccessible core of a body and point in its direction as if pointing towards its own horizon. Those are occasions of estrangement.

In order to understand those particular instances of performance, it is useful to go back to the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima of Mantinea mentioned earlier. In it, Diotima hints at the same problem by drawing attention to two different kinds of poetry. Despite her inclusion of all poetic events under the umbrella of poetry, Diotima eventually adds a small caveat to her previous statement:

Nevertheless [...], as you also know, these craftsmen are not called poets. We have other words for them, and out of the whole of poetry we have marked off one part, the part the Muses give us with melody and rhythm, and we refer to this by the word that means the whole. For this alone is called 'poetry,' and those who practice this part of poetry are called poets.<sup>137</sup>

What, then, is that absolute dedication to *poiēsis*? How does it differ from a mere instance of translation of a body into a phenomenal *persona*, and what does it bring forth or make present?

In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger claimed that the work of art has to do with *alētheia* (ἀλήθεια), the "unconcealment of beings."<sup>138</sup> As such, Heidegger continued, it "is not concerned with the reproduction of a particular being that has at some time been actually present. Rather, it is concerned to reproduce the general essence of things."<sup>139</sup> As a result, if performance is about

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<sup>137</sup> Plato, *Complete Works*, 488.

<sup>138</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off The Beaten Track*, eds. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

bodies role-playing with one another whilst never being exhausted by the roles they play, then the performances Diotima of Mantinea associates with the muses, and Heidegger with the work of art, are instances of a particular type of performance, one that enables a closer level of contact between the bodies involved in them, revealing something about the latter that had not been contained in any of their phenomenal manifestations. In short, and to use Heidegger's term, in those performances bodies appear somehow unconcealed.

Graham Harman made a similar claim with the introduction of his concept of "allure," which he used to name the moment in which the withdrawn presence of a "real object" is highlighted.<sup>140</sup> "Allure," which Harman claimed to be a feature of, amongst others, aesthetic experience and humour, is what happens when the tension between "sensual qualities" and the "real object" hiding behind them somehow disintegrates, thus allowing for the "object" to reveal itself as withdrawn, like a barely perceptible light that suddenly starts flickering in the dark and from a distance.<sup>141</sup> According to Harman, "allure" does not reveal the "real object" because, as it was already seen above, "real objects" withdraw from relations. Instead, it is alluded to despite remaining inaccessible, it is unveiled as having a core that exceeds any of its appearances. Harman's "allure" is, therefore, a kind of knowledge formed not through direct contact—like the contact made when a body encounters another body's *persona*—but through the sudden realisation that a previously familiar body is ultimately a stranger. As such, "allure" can be equated with the kind of sublime Timothy Morton found in Longinus:

Burkean and Kantian sublimity are both about reactions in the subject. Burke locates this reaction in the power of the object, while Kant locates it in the freedom of the subject. But these are just two sides of the same correlationist coin. Longinus, in contrast, is talking about intimacy with an alien presence: the sublime is what evokes this proximity of the alien.

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<sup>140</sup> See Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 211–221.

<sup>141</sup> For an idea of Harman's development of the notion of 'allure,' see Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005), 142–143; Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, 137–138; and Graham Harman, *L'Object Quadruple: Une Métaphysique des Choses Après Heidegger* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 118–119.

The ekphrastic object makes us see ourselves as objects traversed—translated by others. Longinian ekphrasis is not about the reaction of the (human) subject, but about rhetorical modes as affective-contemplative techniques for summoning the alien.<sup>142</sup>

Therefore, when performance appears as such, bodies are able to emerge as strangers from behind the roles they play in the contingency of each encounter. Despite their inability to fully reveal themselves to one another, such an experience of estrangement has the ability to foreground their strange, hidden core. If performance is the way through which bodies translate themselves to one another, estrangement is what happens when bodies suddenly flicker from behind the contingency of their imperfect translations. In order for that to happen, performance needs to be hyperbolised so much that it turns opaque and becomes visible as performance, therefore foregrounding the theatrical space of the encounter which, to paraphrase Harman, “is both nearness and distance.”<sup>143</sup> Because, when that takes place, performance highlights the theatrical cleavage between *persona* and witness, estrangement can be seen as an expansion of the Brechtian *Verfremdung* onto the wider *theatron* of the world, beyond the ‘Nature’/‘Culture’ divide. For, as Walter Benjamin wrote of Brecht’s epic theatre:

The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. But ‘represent’ does not here signify ‘reproduce’ in the sense used by the theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to *uncover* those conditions. (Once could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*ver fremden*].) This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted.<sup>144</sup>

Through its uncovering of the theatrical artifice of all encounters, estrangement reveals the strangeness of bodies that would otherwise pass as familiar. As Fig. 17 shows, in those occasions of everyday performance that trigger nothing but

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<sup>142</sup> Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 170–171.

<sup>143</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, 218.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?” [second version], in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 18.

recognition, bodies encounter one another only partially through the roles they play for each other: i.e. bodies  $\psi$  and  $\omega$  in the diagram are only able to encounter each other's performed *personae*  $\psi'$  and  $\omega'$ . However, in instances of estrangement, the contingency and ephemerality of their *personae* is highlighted and bodies are revealed as being more than any of the roles they might play. Thus, in the diagram, bodies  $\psi$  and  $\omega$  discover the existence of a differential between their bodies and the performed ways in which they appear to both themselves and one another. As a result of the foregrounding of that unsolvable differential, they become estranged.<sup>145</sup>

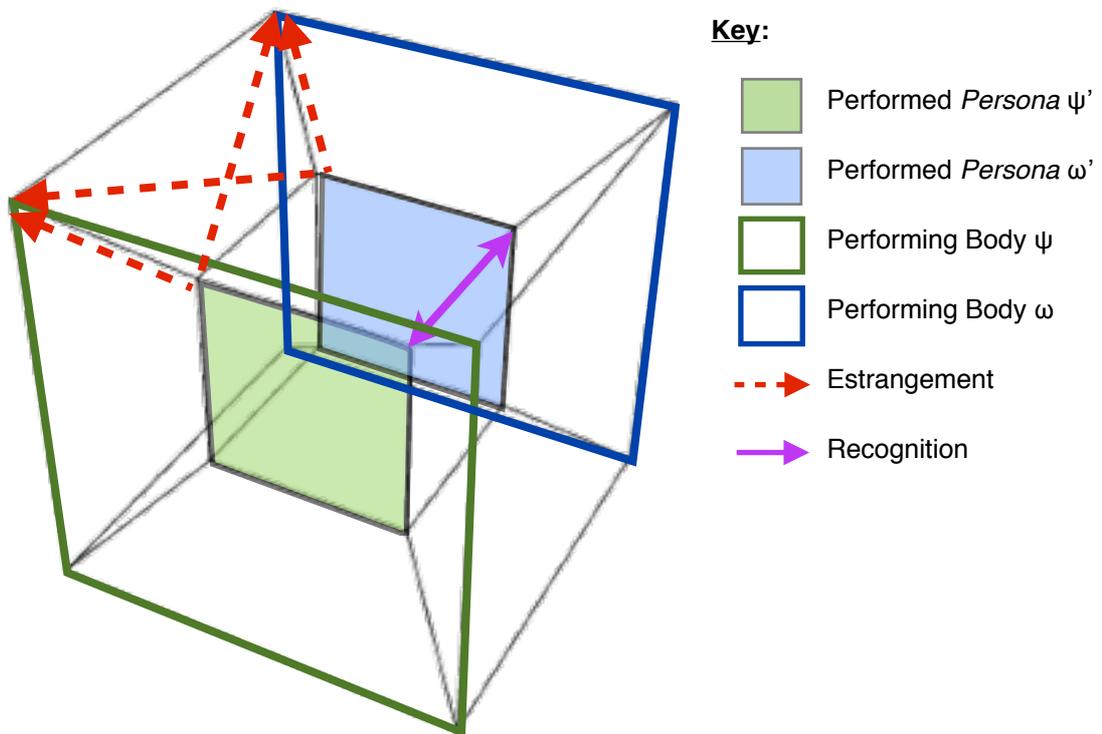


Fig. 17: Diagram of estrangement and recognition.

The chapter that now concludes responded to the need for addressing performance theory in light of the Anthropocene. Such need, triggered by the ongoing ecological crisis and the flattening of the world that came out of the blurring of the once unquestionable divide between 'Nature' and 'Culture,' has led to a rethinking, reconfiguration, and expansion of the notion of performance in such a way that it was eventually said of all occasions in which bodies

<sup>145</sup> The notion of estrangement will be developed further in Chapter Five, namely in terms of its ecopolitical consequences. As part of that development, examples will be given of both human and nonhuman instances of estrangement in order to better clarify the relationship between the latter and everyday performance (see below, pp. 228–239).

encounter one another, regardless of their human or nonhuman nature. Performance, this chapter has argued, works in all events in which a body presents itself to another body by playing a role, i.e. by being translated into a contingent and ephemeral image of itself which will never exhaust its being. Understood in that way, performance is a poietic process, one that creates images that stand for bodies even if only tangentially and only for the duration of each encounter.

Further to that, attention has also been paid to those encounters which, despite still falling under the category of performance, are able to bring-forth a different kind of knowledge, one that points in the direction of the strange core of bodies. In such occasions of estrangement, performance can become visible as such and foreground the theatrical conditions under which it takes place, therefore allowing bodies to rediscover one another as strangers.

The next chapter—Chapter Three—will examine the consequences that such an opening of performance theory to the nonhuman can have for critical responses to performance encounters: if performance happens in the encounters between all kinds of bodies, human and nonhuman, and if, at the same time, it never grants access to the full reality of a body, what tools does the scholar have in his or her possession for responding to such events? Can scholarly writing also trigger the kind of estrangement that allows the withdrawn reality of bodies to become noticed while still not being grasped?

However, before delving into those questions, an Interlude will now follow. Through it, the general theory of performance that has just been sketched will intersect two very different works: Art Orienté Objet's *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* and Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, two pieces that, despite their very striking differences, can be seen to enact a similar blurring of the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide as well as a foregrounding of the ultimate strangeness of all bodies, in line with the argument that has been put forward in the chapter that now concludes.

—INTERLUDE—

**Tales on the Impossibility of Touch**

*[The] gate does not simply connect inside and outside nor the door one space and another; rather, the door puts inside and outside into a special relation in which the outside first becomes properly outside and the inside first becomes properly inside.*  
—Bernhard Siegert<sup>1</sup>

*The rock does not just sit there being a rock, although it is that, too.*  
—Peter Pabst<sup>2</sup>

**1. Scene: *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi***

It's the 22nd of February 2011 at Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana. Inside, at the centre of a large white room punctuated with white columns, there's a panoply of hospital and lab equipment. Surrounding it, the bodies of the spectators who have turned up to witness an historical event: the engineering of a centaur, live.

Kapelica is a gallery renowned for taking risks. As its director, Jurij Krpan, noted in the gallery's curatorial statement:

[We] favour artists who abide at the edge, who widen our cognitive horizons and provide the means for us to see, through their poetics, the world from a different perspective; to reflect it and wake from the daze of a virtual world which is persuading us that we have never felt better.<sup>3</sup>

No surprise, then, that Kapelica, a space that had previously welcomed works by, amongst many others, Stelarc, Franko B, Critical Art Ensemble, Ron Athey,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Siegert, "Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic," trans. John Durham Peters, *Grey Room* 47 (2012), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Pabst quoted in Norbert Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, trans. Stephen Morris (Munich: K. Kieser Verlag, 2008), 260.

<sup>3</sup> Jurij Krpan, "Curatorial Statement," *Galerija Kapelica*, accessed April 8, 2014, [http://www.kapelica.org/index\\_en.html#content=2](http://www.kapelica.org/index_en.html#content=2).

Oleg Kulig, and Orlan, was eventually chosen as the right place for such controversial event.

The work, entitled *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* (*May the Horse Live in Me*), is the latest output by Art Orienté Objet, the French duo comprised of biochemist-turned-artist Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin who, since 1991, have been producing works that address the relationship between art and science through exploring notions of hybridity in the context of the global ecological crisis.<sup>4</sup>

At the centre-left of the room stands Benoît Mangin, wearing a white lab coat, next to all the tools that are both functional and symbolic: the stainless steel furniture, the syringes and blood collection tubes, the tank full of liquid nitrogen, the Petri dishes... On the other side of the room, centre-right, Marion Laval-Jeantet awaits, dressed in black, sat on a bare hospital bed (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18: Art Orienté Objet, *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi*, 2011. Photo: Miha Fras.

Suddenly, the audience is distracted by a neighing sound coming from the far-right of the room. There, a horse appears on a screen, opening up the projection of video documentation of the *in vitro* research stages that preceded the live performance. Once the projection ends, a real flesh-and-bone horse is

<sup>4</sup> See Pascal Pique, "Art Orienté Objet: vers une nouvelle alchimie de l'art et du vivant; Entretien avec Marion Laval-Jeantet," *ETC* 88 (2009–2010): 28–31; and Chloé Pirson, *Art Orienté Objet: Marion Laval-Jeantet & Benoît Mangin* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2013), 29–42.

led into the room from the left-side door, its presence disrupting both the sterility of the lab and the conventions of the performance space—as an animal, the horse belongs in neither of them.

As the horse enters the space and circulates around the room, Mangin fills a syringe with horse plasma—including forty different kinds of horse immunoglobulins—and injects it into Laval-Jeantet’s bloodstream, whilst she sits calmly on the bed. The aim: to synthesise Chiron, to turn the mythical centaur into organic matter.

Once injected with the plasma, Laval-Jeantet’s body enters an immunological frenzy in response to the foreignness of the horse-parts pushed into its veins. Such internal inflammatory reaction, invisible to the audience witnessing the scene, is illustrated by the projection of a video which aims to represent that which cannot be seen: the artist’s body turned into a war zone, a familiar territory ransacked and occupied by foreign troops driven by rhetorics of integration and the promise of a new, better future together. As Chloé Pirson noted:

The virtuality of the film is answered by a concrete reality that escapes the spectators. Marion Laval-Jeantet lives, in her body, the effects of the injection. The forty families of immunoglobulins inoculated affect her metabolism. Her body starts boiling, making her move between alternating states of coldness and intense fever. Such classic symptoms of inflammation are joined by headaches, falling blood pressure, vertigo, and fatigue.<sup>5</sup>

Once the initial shock of the inflammatory process fades away, the negotiation between human and horse taking place within the body of the artist is eventually materialised in the gallery space, where artist and horse are brought together in an encounter choreographed as the recognition of a shared interiority, aided by Mangin’s fitting of prosthetic horse hoofs on Laval-Jeantet’s legs (Fig. 19).

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<sup>5</sup> Pirson, *Art Orienté Objet*, 50 (my translation).



Fig. 19: Art Orienté Objet, *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi*, 2011.  
Photo: Miha Fras.

After accompanying the horse on a tour of the gallery space whilst on her prosthetic legs, Laval-Jeantet goes back to the hospital bed, ready for the last stage of the performance: to have some of her newly-hybridised blood taken, placed in Petri dishes, and lyophilised by Benoît Mangin as centaur blood—a fragile memento, the frozen trace of a hybrid body that was never really fully present (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20: Art Orienté Objet, *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi*, 2011. Photo: Miha Fras.

## 1. Aftermath: Intimate Distances

In the days that followed the Ljubljana performance, Marion Laval-Jeantet noted severe changes in mood and behaviour, something that she was quick to attribute to the horse immunoglobulins injected into her bloodstream and to the resulting becoming-horse of her own human body:

In the days following [...] I had the impression of being extra-human. I was not in my ordinary body. I was hyper powerful, hypersensitive, hypernervous, very fearful, with the emotionality of an herbivore. I couldn't sleep. I had the feeling, a bit, that I was possibly a horse.<sup>6</sup>

The artist's narration of her symptoms in the minutes and days following the inoculation of filtered horse plasma, as well as her claim to have become horse-like, appear to point to the successful accomplishment of the performance's aims, namely, 1) to use the human body as a vessel to save an animal species through *in vivo* storage of its DNA, and 2) to invert the usual exploitation of animals by humans in the name of Science, all whilst 3) exploring interspecies hybridity and the human-animal continuum. As she explained:

The idea was born from the exhibition *Art Biotech* organised by Jens Hauser at Lieu Unique in 2003. There was the problem of the lab animal, of animal consumption, of the tissue culture aimed at replacing livestock meat still depending on the slaughter of animals in order to obtain proteins for culture... and all those approaches have systematically presented a conception of the animal exploited on behalf of a humanity that depletes the living. [...] And, naturally, the idea was born to invert that given, to exploit myself on behalf of that animal.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the importance of drawing attention to the exploitation of animals by humans in the name of scientific development, of highlighting the paradoxical nature of the sciences as life-savers for some and death-bringers

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<sup>6</sup> Marion Laval-Jeantet quoted in Leon J. Hilton, "The Horse in My Flesh': Transpecies Performance and Affective Athleticism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013), 501.

<sup>7</sup> Marion Laval-Jeantet, *Che Le Panda Vive en Moi: Projet de Recherche Biomédicale de Art Orienté Objet*, ethics report (2012), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/7574350/Que%20le%20panda%20vive%20en%20moi.docx> (my translation). See also Hilton, "The Horse in My Flesh'," 488.

for others, the remainder of this section will focus on the apparent success Art Orienté Objet had in producing a human-horse hybrid and documenting it through the lyophilisation of ‘centaur’ blood. In doing so, it will be claimed that 1) such hybridisation did obviously never take place, and 2) that the value of *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* lies elsewhere, namely, in how it draws attention to the ways in which bodies are able to enmesh themselves deeply in one another whilst simultaneously being unable to give themselves entirely to the grasp (or ingestion) of the other. In short, how bodies can never be reduced to the traces (or aftertastes) they nonetheless leave in the world.

The history of the inoculation of animal blood in humans can be traced back to 1667, when Jean-Baptiste Denis injected 300ml of sheep’s blood into the bloodstream of a febrile young man. The patient eventually died of haemolytic shock as a consequence of his immune system’s attempt at destroying the foreign red blood cells.<sup>8</sup> As Chloé Pirson wrote:

One had to wait until 1900 for the Austrian Karl Landsteiner to discover the different human blood groups and until 1940 for him to associate them with the Rhesus factor. The transfusion between humans has since then been under control, but the human-animal incompatibility remains total, the crossing of interspecies blood causing immediate coagulation.<sup>9</sup>

In order to control the physiological reactions to the inoculation of horse blood in Laval-Jeantet’s bloodstream, the French artistic duo turned to Switzerland and to the Laboratoire Inflammation, Tissus Épithéliaux et Cytokines (LITEC) of the University of Poitiers, where they followed, *in vitro*, the inflammatory process triggered by the inoculation of horse blood into a human organism. By doing so, the artists were able to model the damage the inoculation would cause *in vivo* and take the necessary measures to reduce the likelihood of its happening. As

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<sup>8</sup> See Laval-Jeantet, *Che Le Panda Vive en Moi*.

<sup>9</sup> Pirson, *Art Orienté Objet*, 43 (my translation). For more on the immune response to interspecies transplants, also known as xenotransplantation and which include blood transfusions between different mammals, see Daniel Candinas and David Adams, “Xenotransplantation: postponed by a millennium?,” *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 93, no. 2 (2000): 63–66; Mohantha Dooldeniya and Anthony Warrens, “Xenotransplantation: where are we today?,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 96, no. 3 (2003): 111–117; and Marcel Levi, “Disseminated intravascular coagulation,” *Critical Care Medicine* 35, no. 9 (2007): 2191–2195.

a result of the *in vitro* stage of research, it became necessary to filter out all the elements of horse blood that could lead to death once injected in Laval-Jeantet's human bloodstream: all horse erythrocytes, lymphocytes, macrophages, and some dangerous immunoglobulins. In the end, the artists were only left with horse plasma purified of all horse cells, and containing nothing other than a few hormones, lipides, and less dangerous proteins including some families of immunoglobulins, cytokines, and alarmins.<sup>10</sup>

Immunoglobulins, cytokines, and alarmins are all important proteins that play active roles in animal immune responses and in cellular communication. Whilst immunoglobulins, also known as antibodies, are Y-shaped proteins that bind themselves to foreign bodies such as viruses in order to neutralise them, cytokines are a looser category of chemical messengers released by cells to affect the behaviour of other cells. Alarmins, on the other hand, are a kind of molecules produced by dying or damaged cells to signal tissue damage and trigger an immune response to it.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Laval-Jeantet:

[All those] proteins represent, in fact, vectors of information that, as part of a chain of immune reactions akin to a system of keys and locks, reach different organs of the body triggering changes in their functioning.<sup>12</sup>

Now, if one agrees that the artists intended to force human and horse so close together that some kind of hybridisation of the two bodies would take place, it is interesting that in order to purportedly do so and still manage to survive, they have had to filter the horse blood so much that the only thing they were left with was a 'soup' of various proteins floating in serum that had been purified of all cells and horse DNA, i.e. of everything that could be read as too foreign and trigger life-threatening events such as haemolysis, disseminated intravascular coagulation, shock, or cardiac arrest. In short, to be able to inoculate horse blood into the human bloodstream, the artists have had to purify it and be left

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the *in vitro* work that preceded the performance and the inoculation *in vivo* see Pierson, *Art Orienté Objet*, 47–48; and Laval-Jeantet, *Che Le Panda Vive en Moi*.

<sup>11</sup> See Marco Bianchi, "DAMPs, PAMPs and alarmins: all we need to know about danger," *Journal of Leukocyte Biology* 81, no. 1 (2007): 1–5; and "Immune Cells and Their Products," National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, last modified October 2, 2008, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/immunesystem/immunecells/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> Laval-Jeantet, *Che Le Panda Vive en Moi*.

with only the blood components that would be able to pass as less foreign. By the time they did so, the liquid they were left with was only very remotely related to horse blood and, therefore, even more distant from the ‘horseness’ it was meant to carry within it. In their attempt at forcing a fusion of human and horse, the artists have had to further push both animals apart.

The problem with choosing horse blood as a vehicle of ‘horseness’ is that, in line with the argument that unfolded in the previous chapter, bodies cannot be reduced to their parts and a horse can certainly not be reduced to the contents of its veins. Horse blood is not able to gallop, it doesn’t neigh, nor can it be forced to run the Grand National and probably die whilst doing so. Horse blood, that soup made of water, horse blood cells, proteins, hormones, sugars, lipids, and electrolytes, does not eat hay nor does it bite or kick when threatened. In other words, horse blood cannot exhaust a horse anymore than human blood can exhaust a human. If an individual human does not become someone else after receiving blood or an organ from another human, and if the donor doesn’t cease to be him or herself after donating some of his or her own tissue, it makes no sense to expect the ‘horseness’ of the horse—i.e. that which makes it a horse and not a cow—to be reducible to its blood, nor the human who received it to suddenly cease being human and become centaur or horse-like. Were the ‘horseness’ of the horse to be exhausted by the blood in its veins, the horse would no longer remain itself after having had some of its blood taken. Nor would a human donor be allowed to remain human if his or her ‘humanness’ was reducible to whichever organ or tissue he or she decided to give away.

Furthermore, because the human body safeguards its autonomy and survival through immune self-nonsel self discrimination, once inoculated with foreign blood corpuscles, the body of Laval-Jeantet had no choice other than to neutralise the intruders or be defeated.<sup>13</sup> As it was already noted, had the foreign corpuscles been actual horse blood cells, the body of the artist would most certainly not be able to safely cope with the threat and would therefore eventually succumb to disseminated intravascular coagulation, haemolysis, shock, or cardiac arrest.

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the human body’s ability to differentiate between antigens that belong to it and foreign antigens, see Abul Abbas and Adnrew Lichtman, *Basic Immunology: Functions and Disorders of the Immune System* (Philadelphia: Saunders Elsevir, 2011), 173–187.

However, as the inoculated liquid was made of less threatening elements, the body was able to trigger a successful immune response to fight off and neutralise the threat, thus guaranteeing its own recovery and survival. As a result, one could argue that, rather than being signs of her becoming-centaur, the symptoms that Laval-Jeantet claimed to have experienced were, in fact, nothing other than the classical signs of infection and immune response: fever, chills, headaches, disorientation, fatigue, disturbances in sleep patterns, hypersensitivity to sound and light, etc.—all symptoms one can easily associate with acute immune reactions to several kinds of pathogenic microorganisms from seasonal flu viruses to HIV.<sup>14</sup> In the end, the fact is that the body of the artist was able to identify the inoculated components of horse blood as foreign antigens and proceed to neutralise them, thus precluding the possibility of any kind of lasting successful incorporation of horse-parts into the human body of the artist. More, never was the immune reaction of the artist a response to the ‘horseness’ supposedly carried by the inoculated liquid. Instead, it was simply a reaction to the foreignness of its particles, to its non-identity with the body into which they were injected.

Against the premise grounding the performance, the fact that the artist was able to be inoculated with horse plasma and somehow have horse-parts inside her human body was no evidence of the success of its promised human-horse hybridisation. Instead, it was exactly through its highlighting of the possibility of foreign bodies to enter a human body that the performance managed to simultaneously foreground the impossibility of their hybridity. With its creation of an opening or gate through which horse plasma entered Marion Laval-Jeantet’s body, the needle did not so much break the distinction between the horse and the human but it posited the two as distinct and incommensurable bodies. Thanks to its stepping through the door opened by the needle into the body of the artist, the horse plasma subjected itself to the order of the space it entered, to the immunological law that was enacted through a differentiation of interior self and exterior nonself, of familiar human blood and foreign horse plasma. What becomes crucial is that the gate opened by the needle into the body of the

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, “Flu—Symptoms,” *NHS Choices*, accessed April 28, 2014, <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Flu/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>; and “HIV and AIDS—Symptoms,” *NHS Choices*, accessed April 28, 2014, <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/HIV/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>.

artist both signalled its closure to the body of the horse whilst simultaneously allowing their enmeshment or cohabitation, however fragile and temporary.

In conclusion, if there is any way in which Art Orienté Objet's attempt at hybridising human and horse was successful, it was so only in the domain of representation—as theatre, as role-playing—for both human and horse remained separated at all times throughout the duration of their encounter. The only thing that entered the body of Marion Laval-Jeantet was a watered down version of horse blood, a flavourless 'soup' of water and proteins, deprived of blood cells and horse DNA. Only in that way was the artist able to be injected with the plasma and survive to tell the story. But even if the inoculated liquid had been full-on horse blood, it would still not have been able to carry the 'horseness' of the horse into the body of the artist, for the horse would never cease to be less of a horse after having had some of its blood taken.

It is there, one can therefore argue, that the ecological value of the piece resides: in the failure of its promise. In other words, the performance succeeded not in its attempt to hybridise human and horse, but in the way in which it revealed the impossibility of such hybridisation and, therefore, in how it highlighted the distance that separates human and horse even at the peak of their enmeshment in one another. In having to distance the inoculated liquid from the horse where it came from through the filtration of several of its components parts, Art Orienté Objet did nothing other than draw attention to the impossibility of a safe grasp—that is, containment—of horse by human, whilst simultaneously highlighting their ability to still affect one another.

Rather than pushing Marion Laval-Jeantet's body away from 'humanness' and closer to 'horseness,' *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* presented instead human and horse as autonomous, irreducible, and irreconcilable bodies that will always remain apart even when closely tied together.

## 2. Scene: *Café Müller*

The café is barely lit by the light coming through the revolving glass door that separates inside from outside. From the left hand side, Woman No. 1—long dark hair, white petticoat—enters the space and moves down towards the revolving door, her body hitting the tables and chairs that do not just sit there being tables and chairs, although they are that, too. As she moves, her body is barely visible in its attempt to negotiate the desired trajectory with the obstacles it finds in the space of its surroundings. The distant sounds of her movement hint at the nudity of her feet rubbing against the floor. There is no music.

Suddenly, the revolving door meets everybody's expectations and delivers a woman who arrives from the outside. The lights come on—or just about. With red hair, wearing a dark fur coat, and walking on high-heels, the Red-Haired Woman from the outside moves like she knows where she's going. She walks around the stage managing to avoid the furniture and then leaves, taking with her the sound of her high-heels hitting the floor. *toc toc toc toc... toc toc toc toc...*

Woman No. 2, also in a petticoat, enters and crosses the café, left to right, her eyes closed, bumping into the tables and chairs. She stops. Music comes on—a lament. She turns back and runs while Man No. 1, dressed in a black suit, does his best to clear the furniture out of her way. A dry sound: the wall stopped her body from running farther (Fig. 21).

Neither Woman No. 1 nor Woman No. 2, in their white petticoats—one restricted to the back of the stage, the other desperately running back and forth across it—are able to see the space that surrounds them nor the man in the black suit who prevents the chairs from blocking their movement and bruising their bodies.



Fig. 21: Pina Bausch, *Café Müller*, 1978. Film still.

Taken by exhaustion, Woman No. 2 crosses the stage once again, this time slowly, towards the embrace of Man No. 2, his eyes similarly shut. At that moment, Man No. 3 comes in and reshapes their encounter so that Woman No. 2, rather than embraced, ends up laying in the arms of Man No. 2. However, he can't hold her because her body is that of a rock. She falls on the floor but quickly stands up and, once again, tries the original embrace. Man No. 3—who by now was about to leave the stage—on watching what had just happened, returns and reshapes the encounter that still fails, for a second time, to be maintained. The whole cycle is repeated at increasingly fast speeds until Woman No. 2 leaves, bumping into the furniture, to the back of the stage, where she sits at a table, her petticoat taken off and dropped by her feet.

At this moment Red-Haired Woman returns to see what's going on even if, despite seeing, she doesn't seem to understand. She leaves.

Man No. 3 comes in and carries Man No. 2, shifting his position as if he was another piece of the furniture environing him.

Red-Haired Woman comes back. She does her best to grasp what she sees. She fails (Fig. 22).



Fig. 22: Pina Bausch, *Café Müller*, 1978. Film still.

Music: a second lament.

Woman No. 1 who, up until now, had spent all her time at the back of the stage, moves forward and dances as if wanting to reveal what lies behind her shut eyelids. Whilst that happens, Man No. 2 moves frantically across the stage—left to right to left—followed by Red-Haired Woman (who sees but cannot grasp) and by Man No. 1 (who clears the furniture out of the way).

Man No. 1 and Man No. 3 leave accompanied by Red-Haired Woman. At this moment, Woman No. 1 makes a move towards the revolving door that refuses to deliver her to the outside despite her increasing efforts to force her way out.

Man No. 2, who had been left on the café floor, heads towards Woman No. 2 who is still sat at the table. She gets up, puts her petticoat on, turns to him, and they embrace each other. He drops her like the first time around, albeit this time without the intervention of Man No. 3, who sits at the table with Red-Haired Woman watching the events unfold.

Suddenly, Man No. 2 throws himself on the floor while Woman No. 2 sits once again at the table, her petticoat taken off and dropped by her feet. We've seen this before.

Music: Yet another lament.

Man No. 2 gets up and starts running desperately across the stage while an incredulous Red-Haired Woman follows him and Man No. 1 (who arrives to, once again, move the furniture). They've seen it all before but still they haven't grasped.

Eventually Man No. 2 falls, exhausted, on the floor whilst Red-Haired Woman drops her long dark coat and, in her light blue dress, goes on to—repeatedly—perform a series of familiar gestures she brought from the outside perhaps as a way of reminding everybody and herself of whom she thinks she is. While she does so, Woman No. 2 leaves the stage, carrying in her hands, placed against her chest, the petticoat she once wore.

Red-Haired Woman suddenly remembers who she thinks she is and, realising that she does not belong there, leaves the café (although it is hard to believe she will not return).

Woman No. 2 comes back and, for a third time, goes for the ever-failing embrace of Man No. 2.

Red-Haired Woman returns although she knows she shouldn't have done so. She searches for Man No. 2 and kisses him, tenderly. He leaves and she follows him, they kiss. He leaves and she follows him, they kiss. He runs and she chases him. He runs and she chases him. He runs and she chases him. He runs. She chases him, lost.

Man and Woman No. 2 attempt a final embrace. For once it all seems to go well but, as they reach the edge of the stage, they start throwing each other repeatedly against the wall. "Even just the attempt to break through a surface and to fail is, to our mind, a worthwhile adventure," they think.

While the interior world of the café appears to crumble with the impossibility of touch, Red-Haired Woman, once again, searches for comfort and certainty in familiar gestures (Fig. 23).

Slowly, Woman No. 1 moves from the back to centre-stage, driven by her own interiority, which is seen but not grasped by Red-Haired Woman.

In a final gesture of recognition or, perhaps, resignation, Red-Haired Woman puts her red wig on the head of Woman No. 1 and her long dark coat over her

shoulders. Red-Haired Woman No. 1 moves across the stage as the lights slowly go off, leaving only the sound of the furniture being hit by her body.

*toc... toc... toc...*



Fig. 23: Pina Bausch, *Café Müller*, 1978. Film Still.

## 2. Aftermath: Ecological Negotiations

Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* is often associated with the struggle of human bodies with their interiority and the forces from the outside that try to tame and civilise them. It is, therefore, commonly seen to make power and the social explicit through its persistent staging of human bodies encountering and struggling with one another both as individuals and as representatives of the wider gender, race, and class divides. As a result, Bausch has become known for alienating what would otherwise have been recognised as familiar. Through her repetitive presentation of recognisable gestures of everyday life in a way that draws attention to the power structures behind them, Bausch, like Brecht, succeeded in "[freeing] socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today."<sup>15</sup> By appropriating Brechtian techniques while simultaneously creating pieces that, in their

<sup>15</sup> Bertold Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 192.

eschewing of dramatic text and ‘fourth walls,’ and in their favouring of process and immediacy, are closer to Artaud’s theatre of cruelty than to Brecht’s epic theatre, Bausch’s body of work is consensually seen as having taken modern dance and turned it into a laboratory for the investigation of the forces, internal and external, that, through meeting on its surfaces, ‘write’ the human body.<sup>16</sup> As Johannes Birringer wrote:

The borderline in Bausch’s tanztheater is the concrete human body, a body that has specific qualities and a personal history—but also a body that is written about, and written into social representations of gender, race, and class.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding its exploration of human bodies, their materiality, interiority, and the conditions under which they encounter one another, there is an important element of Bausch’s work that is not paid sufficient attention in critical discourse despite the insistence with which it is foregrounded in all of her pieces. That element is the nonhuman.

Although also a defining feature of her style, the nonhuman bodies in Bausch’s work are normally treated as supporting elements by a mostly human-centred scholarly literature. That has been the case even if too often Bausch’s human performers find their movement impaired or otherwise affected by the nonhumans with which they share the stage: In *Das Frühlingsopfer* (1975),

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<sup>16</sup> For more on that established reading of Bausch’s *Tanztheater*, see Raimund Hoghe, “The Theatre of Pina Bausch,” trans. Stephen Tree, *The Drama Review: TDR* 24, no. 1 (1980): 63–74; Norbert Servos, “The Emancipation of Dance: Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theatre,” trans. Peter Harris and Pia Kleber, *Modern Drama* 23, no. 4 (1980): 435–447; Norbert Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, trans. Stephen Morris (Munich: K. Kieser Verlag, 2008), 11–32; Royd Climenhaga, *Pina Bausch* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), 50–68; and Emily Coates, “Beyond the Visible: The Legacies of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 32, no. 2 (2010): 1–7.

It is worth mentioning, however, that, as Kate Elswit noted, what is commonly seen as the Bauschian style is only really evident in the works produced during the first eight years of a career spanning over thirty years. See Kate Elswit, “Ten Evenings with Pina: Bausch’s ‘Late’ Style and the Cultural Politics of Coproduction,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 215–233. For more on Bausch’s marriage of Brecht and Artaud in her work, see David W. Price, “The Politics of the Body: Pina Bausch’s ‘Tanztheater,’” *Theatre Journal* 42, no. 3 (1990): 324–328; and Susan Manning, “An American Perspective on Tanztheater,” in *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook: The Making of Tanztheater*, ed. Royd Climenhaga (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 33–34. See also Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” and “The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” in Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 89–100.

<sup>17</sup> Johannes Birringer, “Pina Bausch: Dancing Across Borders,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 30, no. 2 (1986), 86.

there is the peat covering the stage and progressively getting stuck to the sweaty bodies of the dancers, leaving the theatre, in the words of Arlene Croce, “[smelling] like a stable.”<sup>18</sup> In *Arien* (1979), there is a hippopotamus longing for the love of a female dancer.<sup>19</sup> In *Masurca Fogo* (1998), a chicken eats watermelon. In *Nefés* (2003), a wooden floor is filled with water from below. In *Vollmond* (2006), there is the giant rock that appears illuminated by a full moon, and the torrential rain that floods the stage and soaks the evening dresses and suits worn by the dancers. In *Café Müller* (1978), of course, there are the tables and chairs that need to be cleared out of the way so that dancers can move freely and don’t hurt themselves.

Originally the responsibility of Bausch’s partner Rolf Borzík, the set design was passed on to Peter Pabst, who kept Borzík’s style alive and evolving after his death in 1980.<sup>20</sup> Due to the economy of style favoured by both Borzík and Pabst that often saw their black boxes stripped down to their bare walls and their sets reduced to a minimal number of features, each of the elements placed on Bausch’s stage carries a presence that is hard to ignore. In Pabst’s words, “[when] something is just standing there, with no other function than to be attractive, that’s not enough. A set design cannot be merely beautiful.”<sup>21</sup> As such, for Bausch, the elements that make up the set play a more active role than most critics appear to recognise. Like her human performers, Bausch’s nonhuman bodies are there to face the challenge of encountering other bodies, never being allowed to become the background of a main narrative that, in any case, is never present in her work.<sup>22</sup> In Bausch’s *Tanztheater*, all bodies perform irrespectively of their nature. As the choreographer has been quoted saying:

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<sup>18</sup> Arlene Croce, “Bausch’s Theatre of Dejection,” in *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook: The Making of Tanztheater*, ed. Royd Climenhaga (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 194.

<sup>19</sup> In Bausch’s words, the relationship between hippopotamus and dancer is “a love story between [the] two.” Bausch quoted in Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, 239.

<sup>20</sup> See Norberto Servos, “Rolf Borzík,” trans. Stephen Morris, on Tanztheater Wuppertal official website, accessed August 15, 2013, [http://www.pina-bausch.de/en/dancetheatre/set\\_design/borzik\\_rolf.php](http://www.pina-bausch.de/en/dancetheatre/set_design/borzik_rolf.php); and Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, 249–261.

<sup>21</sup> Pabst quoted in Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, 254–255.

<sup>22</sup> For the absence of plot or narrative in Bausch’s work, see Servos, “Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theatre,” 436–437, namely in relation to the “principle of montage” identified by the author in the choreographer’s work. See also Price, “The Politics of the Body: Pina Bausch’s ‘Tanztheater,’” 327.

For me, many different things play a role. What something does to your body: a meadow—you walk on it, and it is totally quiet, and it has a very particular smell. Or water—suddenly your clothes get very long and wet and the water is cold, the sound it makes, or the way the light reflects on it. It's alive in a different way. Or earth—suddenly everything is sticking to your body when you sweat.<sup>23</sup>

In no longer presenting nonhumans as subjected to the human but, instead, as equally participating elements in a complex ecosystem of relations amongst bodies, Bausch invited her audience to look at her performers—humans, animals, peat, water, rocks, furniture, etc.—in a different way, to see the extent in which the roles they play are conditioned by their enmeshment in one another, therefore foregrounding the strangeness beyond the contingency of their familiarity. Ultimately, her work uses alienation techniques to show that bodies, human and nonhuman, can't be exhausted by their appearances.<sup>24</sup> To paraphrase Gabrielle Cody, Bausch's works take place in the aftermath of certainty, and that is the reason why isolation and longing are central features of her work.<sup>25</sup>

Within that context, *Café Müller* becomes a paradigmatic piece. In it, the audiences are confronted with two worlds, one interior and another one exterior. The interior world is represented not only by the two female performers wearing petticoats and dancing with their eyes closed, but also by the only man who dances without seeing. The exterior world, on the other hand, is represented by the red-haired woman that moves around the set wearing high-heels and a fur coat. While her gestures and dance moves are aimed outwards and easily associated with bustling urban environments and popular forms of entertainment, the gestures of the two women in petticoats are aimed inwards, often towards the interior of their chests. The external world is also populated by

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<sup>23</sup> Pina Bausch quoted in Servos, *Pina Bausch: Dance Theatre*, 237.

<sup>24</sup> Bausch's use of alienation is different from Brecht's. Whereas the latter used alienation to reveal the social truths behind someone's behaviour, i.e. to show "people as they really are" (Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," 204), the laboratorial aspect of Bausch's work was more concerned with investigating what moves bodies rather than demonstrating certainties acquired *a priori*. See Gabrielle Cody, "Woman, Man, Dog, Tree: Two Decades of Intimate and Monumental Bodies in Pina Bausch's Tanztheater," *TDR* 42, no. 2 (1998): 115–131.

<sup>25</sup> See Cody, "Woman, Man, Dog, Tree," 124.

the man who clears the furniture out of the way and by the last man who tries, unsuccessfully, to shape the ways in which one of the interior women is embraced by the interior man.

At the boundary between interior and exterior, one finds the café, the place where the performance takes place, populated with black tables and empty chairs, and connected to the outside by the revolving glass door. In that space, full encounters are impossibilities and, therefore, bodies appear strange both to one another and to the audience looking in. On the one hand, there are the two women in their petticoats who are blind to their surroundings except when bumping against the furniture of the café, their world being an internal one. On the other hand, there are the bodies from the outside, better represented by the Red-Haired Woman who can see her surroundings and avoid bumping into furniture, but is still unable to grasp the interiority from within which the women in the white petticoats draw their movement. The encounters between the two worlds can be nothing but partial and contingent, the appearances of bodies are never really able to exhaust their full reality. That is true of the human bodies that cannot see—or, if they can, are still not able to successfully grasp one another—and it is also true of the nonhuman bodies placed on set and that, like their human counterparts, are always somewhat inaccessible, even shy, able to either be seen and, therefore, avoided, or to be touched and, therefore, bumped into.

Never fully encountered by the human performers, the chairs and tables on stage are also never fully grasped by the audience due to their constant oscillation between being a physical presence that obstructs the movement of the performers, and being a symbol of absence and of the distance that will always separate bodies. For as long as they are chairs, they will always be chairs in waiting. Therefore, like the familiar gestures of the human performers that become alien through repetition, so do the nonhuman bodies appear increasingly strange due to the myriad of contingent roles they are forced to play in their encounters with other bodies.

However, as it is hinted by the final sequence in which the red-haired woman places her wig on the head of one of the other women in what comes across as a gesture of recognition, interior and exterior are not separate realities; rather

they are permeable to one another. Or, as it was hinted at in the previous chapter, there is always something of the body that is translated into whichever role it plays. What estrangement reveals is that performed appearances are always contingent and, therefore, can never exhaust the body for which they stand as proxies.

In conclusion, *Café Müller* is a paradigmatic example of the ecologies of Bausch's works, where human bodies never perform in the vacuum but are always thrown into an environment populated with other bodies that affect their movement, get stuck to their skin, soil their clothes, mix with their sweat. Nevertheless, despite their tight entanglement and ability to affect one another, *Café Müller* also stresses how all bodies, whether human or nonhuman, products of 'Culture' or fruits of 'Nature,' will always remain strangers even when standing beside one another.

—THREE—

**Estranging Words: Performance, Writing, Metaphor**

*After the words stopped their dances,  
some other noise, not exactly poetry,  
not exactly music, filled the air.*  
—Peggy Phelan<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter Two, a general theory of performance has been proposed. According to it, performance is understood not only as a human doing, transformative experience, presentation of truth, or restored behaviour. Instead, performance is approached primarily as a communicative event during which a body is translated into a phenomenal version of itself that is encountered by another body. Through that flattening of its meaning, performance was opened up to all encounters between all kinds of bodies, human and nonhuman, on and beyond theatre stages and gallery floors.

However, a problem arises from the thesis that has just unfolded: if performance can indeed happen without the intervention of humans playing the roles of either performers or audiences, how is one to think those occasions of performance from which one has been excluded and proceed to write about them? Furthermore, even if there were human audiences present at the scene, how is it possible to translate into words that which has been witnessed and how legitimate is that knowledge if, as it was claimed, one only really has access to a contingent and distorted version of the performing body? How can one overcome the paradox of not being able to witness a performance—or being able to do so but always in a distorted manner—whilst, at the same time and under the pressures of the ecological age, having to find a way to think

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<sup>1</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

performance in all of its human and nonhuman actualisations? In other words, how can one speak for that which is strange, ungraspable and, therefore, unspeakable?

In order to address those questions, this chapter will investigate the ways in which writing is able to communicate knowledge about bodies despite never losing sight of the contingent nature of what, at any moment, it is able to say, i.e. without overlooking the strangeness of that which it tries to address. The argument will unfold via an exploration of how images function as traces or maps of bodies and of how different kinds of writing have, for centuries, been evoking the memory of bodies, of territories unable to be exhausted by cartographic practices. Starting with a reflection on autobiographical writing and the memoir through an analysis of Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* and, in particular, of the ways in which the author attempted to translate into words his experience of Allan Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, the chapter will then move on to address *ekphrasis* as one of the oldest literary devices aimed at translating images into words. Ultimately the argument will be one that, grounded on the long histories of both the memoir and *ekphrasis*, will posit writing itself as an encounter with bodies and, therefore, as an instance of performance. By becoming aware of the performativity of his or her writing and of the structures that make it so, the scholar will be able to push writing up to a tipping point where bodies are revealed as inexhaustible by their *personae* and evoked as strangers.

## Forensics

It should be fairly easy to accept that, every time one writes about something, one establishes a relation with the subject of one's writing. In that way, it can be said that if one can write about a certain body, one must have some kind of access to the reality of that body no matter how contingent or blurred such access might be. However, that realisation does not solve the problem that has just been identified: if, for instance, one is not directly involved in the encounter of the blade of an axe with the trunk of a tree, how can one still access it? The answer to that question lies in the fact that even if one does not take part as a participant in a given encounter, the encounter itself can still become the object

of one's thought and be accessible through a kind of forensic practice. Example: while walking in a forest, one encounters a tree trunk that has been cut by an axe. At that moment, one does not have access to the axe because the lumberjack has already taken it home with him nor, more importantly, does one have access to the blade of the axe in the way that it was experienced by the tree. What one does have access to, however, is the trace of the axe on the trunk of the tree: the shape, depth, and surface of the cut it opened in the wood. Now, what that cut is, is evidence of the blade of the axe as it encountered the trunk of the tree; it is a translation of a particular encounter in which one did not take active part but that nonetheless one is able to grasp, even if only tangentially, by entering into a relation with the traces it left behind. That is the practice of forensics.

Another example: A bloody murder is committed. When the police arrive at the crime scene, the crime has already taken place and, therefore, the police can only access it by reading the evidence left behind, for evidence are translations of that deadly encounter. Through blood-splatter analysis, DNA tests, fingerprint analysis, etc., forensic investigators eventually form a picture of what happened on the night of the crime. They are not, however, able to form an image of the whole series of events or to know with absolute certainty everything all that has happened. That is because the evidence, as trace or translation, won't ever be able to replace its lost original.

Or yet another one: in 1975 Carolee Schneeman, standing naked on top of a table, pulled a scroll of paper from her vagina and started reading from it. The audience present at the scene could only access Schneeman's intentions indirectly, tangentially via the artist's actions, via her translation of an idea. In the meantime someone took photographs which, in turn, became documents, i.e. traces or translations of Schneemann's performance. Twenty-two years later, art historian Amelia Jones wrote about that event, one in which she was never present.<sup>2</sup> In order to access it, Jones, like any good crime scene investigator, had to translate the existing photographic documentation in order to gain access to the event, even if only tangentially.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," 12–14.

What all those examples demonstrate is that, even if one has not taken part in a given performance encounter, there is always the possibility that one might be able to gain some kind of knowledge of it through the traces it leaves. That is also what happens when one identifies the presence of HIV in the blood by searching for anti-HIV antibodies—another case of forensic investigation. However, what the example of Schneemann's performance also shows is that, even if one takes an active part in the performative encounter as an audience member or even as a performer, one still only has limited access to what goes on, one is still only able to grasp a tiny fraction of the whole event. As Amelia Jones wrote:

[...] I specifically reject such conceptions of body art or performance as delivering in an unmediated fashion the body (and implicitly the self) of the artist to the viewer. The art historian Kathy O'Dell has trenchantly argued that, precisely by using their bodies as primary material, body or performance artists highlight the 'representational status' of such work rather than confirming its ontological priority.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the problem found in trying to write about performance is always the same, regardless of the distance between the writer and the body his or her words try to grasp: it is the problem of the cleavage spectator/performer that makes up the *theatron* of all encounters. The question, then, is how to write about something that is never fully present, something that will always remain at a distance, hidden behind smoked glass windows. In other words, the question for the writer will always be a question of access, no matter how close the object of one's writing might seem. It will, therefore, be a problem of forensics, one concerned with how to best read traces in order to draw more accurate pictures; a problem, therefore, of translation, of trying one's best to filter information from noise, even if only tentatively. And so, in the end, the problem for the writer is the problem of performance itself, or, as it was argued in Chapter Two, the problem of translating a body into an image of itself. For if performance can be found everywhere, if it can be found in the formation of molecules understood as translations of the electric charges of atoms which, in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13. That statement by Amelia Jones also resonates with one of the main postulates of Graham Harman's philosophy, one that has already been presented in Chapter Two, whereby "real objects" are not exhausted by the relations in which they enter and can only relate to one another through proxy (see above, pp. 106–111).

turn, translate the movements of electrons; if it can be found in the formation of social movements, in identity, and in the behaviour of crowds; if it can be found in the way moss grows on tree trunks and even in the movement of celestial bodies, then it will also be found in the encounter between words and their referent.

Accordingly, if all writing is the actualisation of an encounter and if all encounters depend on performance, then writing should not shy away from investigating its performative nature in the hope that, in doing so, it will be able to get closer to the fleeting body signalled by the words written on the page.<sup>4</sup> Out and proud as performance, writing will not concern itself simply with describing or analysing the *personae* its author has encountered in the hope that that will suffice to convey a sense of the bodies to which those *personae* refer. Instead, like any forensic practice, writing that embraces its own performative character will evoke or invoke the presence of the bodies it addresses even if their presence will always remain strange and, therefore, not fully graspable—a bit like the electricity whose presence is betrayed by the bright light of a lamp once it is switched on, even if the light won't ever be able to exhaust the being of the electricity of which it is nonetheless part. In short, writing that foregrounds its own performance as writing is writing that enacts knowledge through estrangement.

### **Evoking Strangers**

In his autobiography entitled *The Motion of Light in Water*, science fiction writer Samuel Delany described the occasion when, in the late Summer of 1960, he, then 18 years old, and his cousin Boyd went to see a presentation of Allan Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. In no more than nine pages of the over five hundred page-strong memoir, Delany presented his readers with a first-hand account of Kaprow's work and of the events leading to and following its presentation at a Second Avenue apartment.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on how performance can, at times, point in the direction of the strange body lying behind an image or translation of itself, see above, pp. 121–126.

Having encountered a black-and-white poster announcing the event on the side of a postbox somewhere on Eighth Street a few days earlier, Delany noted his immediate interest in its use of the word ‘happening:’

An idea was abroad—and it had saturated the times so that even a bright eighteen-year-old might respond to its modernist scrip, if not the Wagnerian bullion behind it—that art must somehow get up off the printed page, must come down from the gallery wall. [...] And the word ‘happening’—with its lack of fanfare on the poster—spoke of just such a moment in which art might step from its current frame into a larger and more theatrical concept and context.<sup>5</sup>

On the evening of the event, Delany and Boyd took the subway to the East Village and walked to the apartment where Kaprow’s work was to be shown. What happened then was met with the uncertainty of someone who does not know what to pay attention to in a work that seems deprived of clear, or at least recognisable, form:

The only truly clear memory I have of the performance proper was that I wasn’t very sure when, exactly, it began. One of the assistants came in and set a small, mechanical windup toy to chatter and click around the floor [...]. I also recall a dish of water sitting on the floor, and a ball of string on a small table [...]. During the brief performance, while we sat in our room, now and again from one of the other chambers we could hear the sound of a single drum or tambourine beat—or, at one point, laughter from one of the isolated groups [...]. There was general silence, general attention: there was much concentration on what was occurring in our own sequestered ‘part’; and there was much palpable and uneasy curiosity about what was happening in the other spaces, walled off by the translucent sheets, with *only a bit of sound, a bit of light or shadow, coming through to speak of the work’s unseen totality.*<sup>6</sup>

After a while and a few more ‘incidents,’ the end of the happening was announced leaving both Delany and Boyd not knowing what to make of it.

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: East Village Sex and Science Fiction Writing, 1960–1965* (London: Paladin, 1990): 179–180.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 181–182 (emphasis added).

Delany confessed that, after having seen the poster for the event, he had expected it to be

[...] rich, Dionysian, and colorful [...] far more complex, denser, and probably verbally boundable [...] rich in meanings and meaning fragments, full of resonances and overlapping associations, playful, sentimental, and reassuring—like a super e. e. cummings poem.<sup>7</sup>

What Delany encountered, instead, was a “spare, difficult, minimal [work], constituted largely by absence, isolation, even distraction, [...] difficult to locate as to its start, content, style, or end.”<sup>8</sup> *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* was, to follow Delany’s firsthand account of it, a work with no clear boundaries: not something hanging on a wall calling for the educated gaze of the spectator while at the same time keeping itself at a reassuring distance from the daily lives of those looking at it. Nor was it a series of epic events unfolding on familiar theatrical stages—sterile, fictitious, formulaic. *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* did not belong to the gallery nor to the stage; it belonged somewhere else, its place being amongst the audiences rubbing shoulders with it.

It was through that shattering of recognisable conventions, carried out by placing the audiences in the middle of whatever was happening, not allowing them full access to the totality of the work, and erasing any recognisable walls between audience and work, that Allan Kaprow fulfilled his aim of blurring ‘art’ and ‘life.’ As the artist wrote in 1979 in relation to his happenings of the late 1950s:

Instead of making an objective image or occurrence to be seen by someone else, it was a matter of doing something to experience it yourself. It was the difference between watching an actor eating strawberries on a stage and actually eating them yourself at home. Doing life, consciously, was a compelling notion to me.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 195.

What Delany's account of that summer evening of 1960 highlighted, though, was the impossibility of making sense of Kaprow's work, of grasping it with absolute certainty by placing it within a precise and comforting epistemological frame—Delany's was a “broken or clouded vision.”<sup>10</sup> In the absence of a frame, then, how can one make sense of a body, in this case, of Kaprow's piece? When ‘art’ becomes ‘life’ or a text uses a foreign grammar, how can communication take place? Or, better, and in Delany's own words, “how [are] we to distinguish facilitation from content—that is, how [are] we to distinguish ‘information’ from ‘noise’?”<sup>11</sup>

The problem Delany faced when trying to grasp Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* was, it too, a problem of translation, the problem everyone faces when prompted to make sense of a body as it enters one's field of perception. In that context, how can one separate the essential from the accidental, information from noise? As it has already been seen in Chapter Two, all encounters between bodies involve translations, role-playing. That, as it has been proposed, is the reason why all encounters depend on performance. Still, the attempt at constructing an understanding of any of those encounters, often through reminiscence, becomes also a problem of translation as the encounter becomes the object of one's writing.

In other words, a body exists and is translated into an image of itself so it can be experienced by another body, that being the first translation. The second translation happens when the encounter with the first body acquires autonomy and becomes itself another body—the plastic body of a memory, the reassuring certainties of a document, the pattern of the blood splattered on the walls—bodies of evidence that go out in the world ready to be translated by other bodies. The difference between translation  $n$  and translation  $n+1$  is only one of degree or level, not one of kind. For if everything is a body or, in Graham Harman's terms, an “object”—from quarks to ideologies to supernovas—and if bodies at the  $n$  level make connections to form new bodies at level  $n+1$ , bodies that then encounter other bodies as parts of higher  $(n+1)+1$  assemblages and

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<sup>10</sup> Gavin Butt, “Happenings in History, or, The Epistemology of the Memoir,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001): 121.

<sup>11</sup> Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 185.

so on, then translations are performed at every step of the way, they are the stuff of connections at whichever level of complexity of the world.

Example: Beethoven had a musical idea which he then translated into a musical score. The musical score was read by Ferenc Fricssay who translated it as a performance of the Berliner Philharmoniker, which was then heard by its audience as Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

Yet another one: The HIV virus started spreading amongst the gay male population of the East and West coasts of the USA. The infection of those individuals' CD4 cells progressed to a stage in which it was translated into a series of symptoms that were initially unable to be read in their relation to one other and to their cause. Those symptoms were eventually translated from the early '80s onwards as AIDS, which was then translated by the media and the public consciousness and read in a variety of ways, from "the result of moral decay and a major force destroying the Boy Scouts," to "Nature's way of cleaning house," "the price paid for the 1960s," "science fiction," or "God's punishment."<sup>12</sup>

Or yet still: Allan Kaprow translated a series of creative ideas into a work entitled *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* which took place within

temporarily erected polythene walls on unpainted wooden frames [dividing] the performance area into [...] six square chambers, each about eight feet by eight feet, each accessible from a door-wide space on the outside, but separated from one another, and through whose translucent wavering walls, you could make out only the ghost of what was going on in the chambers beside or across from yours.<sup>13</sup>

In each chamber of Kaprow's piece, different happenings were expected to take place—18 in total, according to the title. That work, including its title, was witnessed by Samuel Delany who then, albeit tentatively, translated it as a "representation and analysis of the situation of the subject in history."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999): 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

Therefore, following Gavin Butt following Samuel Delany, Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* "[came] to speak of the multiple and contingent viewpoints that go to make up postmodernist discourses on history," a feature that was then replicated by Delany himself when writing his autobiography, in that it "[eschewed] linear narrative in favour of building a representation of its subject through a fragmentary montage-like style."<sup>15</sup> Hence, it can be said that, in *The Motion of Light in Water*, Samuel Delany appropriated the poetic strategies of Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* by making his book go from the promise of an autobiography to a reflection on the multiple narrative layers or viewpoints that constitute one's relationship with any given body or event, be it an early happening, one's personal history, or one's identity as an African-American gay science-fiction writer. In that sense, it is possible to argue that both Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* and Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* constituted two examples of meta-performance or meta-translation, i.e. performances about performing, translations about translating.

### **Translating Absence**

When trying to reflect on the uses, methods, and meanings of translation, the one text that undoubtedly eventually comes to mind is Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," originally published in 1923 as an introduction to Benjamin's own translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*.<sup>16</sup> In that much discussed essay, Benjamin pointed out that an original work and its translation are closely connected in a "natural" or even "vital" way, whereby the translation constitutes the "afterlife" of the original work, its "stage of continued life."<sup>17</sup> In that context, 'life' ought not to be understood as an exclusive feature of cellular bodies but as the unfolding of a body's personal history, whatever its nature may be. As Benjamin wrote, "[in] the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Butt, "Happenings in History, or, The Epistemology of the Memoir," 119–120.

<sup>16</sup> See Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, 257.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

Translation is responsible for providing a body with an afterlife, a life beyond its first life or its previous history, a bio-graphy, i.e. a record or evidence of life. The problem with attempting to provide an account of the life of a body is that, as it has been seen in Chapter Two, one never really has access to the full being of the bodies one encounters. That had already been the problem faced by Samuel Delany when trying to translate both Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings* and his own personal history onto the pages of a book: like all other bodies, human and nonhuman, Kaprow's happening and Delany's life shied away from full disclosure, hiding behind tinted glass screens. What that entails is that every attempt at reaching, making sense of, or otherwise knowing a body will always involve facing the problem of translation, the problem of trying to create an afterlife for a reality that keeps on slipping away. In other words, when all bodies lead distant and strange lives that can never be fully grasped, how can translation point somewhere beyond the contingency of their manifestations in experience? How can one highlight the fact that there will always be something of a body that will exceed its translations? That is the kind of problem that Benjamin himself encountered when reflecting on his role as translator of literary bodies:

For what does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information —hence, something inessential.<sup>19</sup>

For Benjamin, like for the object-oriented thinkers that came after him, the essence of a literary work was "what it contains in addition to information [...], the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'."<sup>20</sup> For that reason, the task of the translator, like that of Delany when writing his memoirs, is always a tentative one. As Benjamin continued:

This, to be sure, is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 70

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth stressing that, although Benjamin was concerned with the particular task of translating literary works from one language to another, in the context of this dissertation and following Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, literary works are not exceptional bodies. In other words, being is said equally of works of literature, car brakes, or dreams of a better future. Therefore, the problem one faces when attempting to translate a body, when trying to communicate it, is always the same regardless of it being a translation of Baudelaire from French into English, a translation of the brakes of a car into negative force, or a translation of dreams of a better future into a particular form of political or social organisation. In all those cases, like in all imaginable others, the task of the translator is the paradoxical task of provisionally connecting a body with one of its contingent *personae* whilst simultaneously knowing that the latter will never exhaust the former. Hence, the most successful translations are the ones that are aware of their contingency and incompleteness while, at the same time, being able to foreground the strangeness of the bodies they seek to translate. As occasions of estrangement, successful translations are therefore akin to the proper name, to the name that points towards the unfathomable core of a body without ever grasping it. In Benjamin's words:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.<sup>22</sup>

That is the reason why, like the proper name, translations can only be further translated because, in "pursuing their own course," they become bodies in their own right. That, too, is what happens with the proper name: saying one's name is João is not the same as saying one is also Juan, Jean, John, Johannes, or Giovanni, although all the latter are translations of the former. As such, like all

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 80–81.

bodies in their own right, their reality will also always exceed any translations which might, nonetheless, establish amongst them a relation of identity. In other words, translations can never be translated back to their original. Because all translations, as Benjamin wrote, pursue their own course and acquire their own autonomy as bodies in the world, a translation is always a first-degree translation, i.e. a translation of a body considered in its autonomy before it can even be thought as a translation of a translation (for the translated body will normally always already be a translation of another body that preceded it). In order to illustrate this point one can go back to the example of AIDS mentioned above: even if AIDS has, in the past, been translated as ‘God’s punishment,’ ‘God’s punishment’ cannot be translated back to ‘AIDS’ without leaving a remainder for ‘AIDS’ is unable to exhaust the full reality of ‘God’s punishment.’ ‘God’s punishment’ has its own strange core and ‘AIDS’ is as much part of it as ‘The Great Flood’ or ‘The Ten Plagues of Egypt’ or, for that matter, any of the other ways in which ‘God’s punishment’ might perform itself. None of those, however, neither individually nor added together, are able to stand for the entirety of ‘God’s punishment.’

### ***Ekphrasis as Translation***

When researching the problem of translation, especially in an art historical context, one will necessarily come across the age-old practice of *ekphrasis*, the rhetorical technique associated with the translation of works of visual art into literary texts. Having originated from the combination of the Greek words *ek* (meaning ‘out’) and *phrazein* (meaning ‘tell,’ ‘declare,’ or ‘pronounce’), *ekphrasis* originally meant ‘telling in full’ or ‘speaking out’ but has eventually come to stand for “the verbal representation of graphic representation.”<sup>23</sup>

It is consensual within literary critical circles that the first known instance of ekphrastic writing, at least in the West, appeared in Book 18 of Homer’s *Iliad*, in

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<sup>23</sup> See Amra Raza, “Artistic Adaptation: Ekphrasis in Pakistani Poetry in English,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 28 (2008): 188; also, James Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 299.

the section known as “The Shield of Achilles.”<sup>24</sup> In that scene, Thetis, Achilles’ goddess mother, visits Hephaestus, son of Zeus and Hera and god of the blacksmiths, craftsmen, technology, fire, and volcanoes, and asks him to make Achilles a new armour to replace the one her son lost. The importance of that passage stems from the fact that Homer decided to direct most of his focus to describing Achilles’ shield, a description that, rather than being static, assumed a dynamic narrative form which the poet used not only to emphasise the process of making the shield but, most importantly, to animate the images with which Hephaestus had decorated it. According to James Francis, in describing those ornaments—the earth, the sea and sky, a city at peace, a city at war, a harvest scene, and the river Ocean—Homer did not limit himself to describe fixed images but created, instead, a detailed account that included “the sequential action of the stories that would be difficult if not impossible to convey by solely visual means.”<sup>25</sup> Homer gave voice to the images forged by Hephaestus onto Achilles’ shield and, in doing so, he made those images literally speak themselves out, as it is demonstrated by the excerpt below:

Two cities in the spacious field he built with goodly state,  
Of divers-languag’d men: the one did nuptials celebrate,  
Observing at them solemn feasts; the brides from forth their bow’rs  
With torches usher’d through the streets; a world of paramours  
Excited by them, youths and maids, in lovely circles danc’d,  
To whom the merry pipe and harp the spritful sounds advanc’d,  
The matrons standing in their doors admiring.<sup>26</sup>

What Homer did in this passage was adopt narrative as the rhetorical style best suited to writing about images, about a particular kind of bodies which, today, are nevertheless more often read as static entities than as events or performative encounters worthy of a time-based narrative approach. As such,

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<sup>24</sup> See James Francis, “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of Ekphrasis,” *American Journal of Philology* 130 (2009): 1–23; Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” 297; Norman Land, “Ekphrasis and Imagination: Some Observations on Pietro Aretino’s Art Criticism,” *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986): 212; and Svetlana Alpers, “Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari’s Lives,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, no. 3&4 (1960): 196.

<sup>25</sup> Francis, “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora,” 9.

<sup>26</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. George Chapman (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), 309.

what is found in ekphrastic writing since Homer is not a description of a representation but, instead, an attempt at evoking what lies beyond the static flatness of the image. In “The Shield of Achilles,” Homer did not simply describe the images with which Hephaestus decorated the armour of the Greek demigod. Instead, he evoked what those images stood for, he translated them by making them speak and, in doing so, he somehow managed to bypass the contingency of their original manifestation and to give them an afterlife in the text.

As a result, what one finds in Homer is a practice of translation that does not simply describe images or attempts to convert them into words in a literal manner as much as it highlights the unfathomable reality hidden behind each representation, lying beyond each appearance. Ekphrastic writing is writing that points towards the body that is simultaneously made visible and camouflaged by its performance, to the performer concealed by its *persona*. Still, and like the images it aims to translate, *ekphrasis* is, itself, also a provisional and incomplete translation, one that is also contingent on the encounter between a particular audience and a specific performance. In other words, both the images in the shield of Achilles and Homer’s ekphrastic description of them are both translations of an always already veiled reality. In the case of the actual shield, bodies were translated and carved onto metal by Hephaestus, the god of fire. The shield then became a body in its own right, irreducible to any of its appearances and named “the shield of Achilles.” Afterwards, it was translated into words by Homer, the poet, who approached it as a translation of a translation, a representation of a representation, but only after it had acquired its autonomy as a body in itself, unable to be fully reduced back to the body from which it had initially emerged. As James Heffernan wrote:

Yet Homer never forgets that he is *representing representation itself*: that he is describing both the act of sculpting and a work of sculpture as well as all the things it represents. He starts each narrative by referring to the making and placing of the scene he narrates; he concludes his most dramatic narratives on a note of charged suspension that evokes the stasis of sculpture; and he fully exploits the representational friction between the sculptor’s medium—the various metals of the shield—and its referents. He thus bears continual witness to the Daedalian power,

complexity and verisimilitude of visual art even as he aspires to rival that art in language that both imagines and represents it.<sup>27</sup>

With his use of *ekphrasis* as a narrative response to the pictorial stasis of the shield of Achilles, Homer inaugurated a mode of translating images into words that would be mimicked by other classical poets such as Hesiod and Virgil and, like many other features of classical thought and artistic practice, recuperated during the Italian Renaissance by early critics such as Pietro Aretino or, more famously, Giorgio Vasari.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite it having been quite a popular literary technique during the beginnings of art historical writing, *ekphrasis* would eventually become more associated with poetry than with 'serious' criticism, as James Heffernan's book *Museum of Words* clearly highlights. In the book, Heffernan concerned himself with writing a history of literature through literature's "perennially conflicted response to visual art."<sup>29</sup> In doing so, he searched for a definition of *ekphrasis* "sharp enough to identify a distinguishable body of literature and yet also elastic enough to reach from classicism to post-modernism, from Homer to Ashbery."<sup>30</sup> The result was a definition of *ekphrasis* as "*the verbal representation of visual representation.*"<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, and as the passage just quoted also hints at, Heffernan was only concerned with 'traditional' works of literature and their writers, something that the subtitle of his book, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, clearly shows. Nowhere in *Museum of Words* is critical writing ever mentioned. From Homer to Ashbery via Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Auden, and William Carlos Williams, Heffernan's *ekphrasis* is more a literary genre than a rhetorical device able to be used by different writers working in a variety of contexts from poetry to criticism.

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<sup>27</sup> Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 22 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> See Francis, "Metal Maidens, Achilles' Shield, and Pandora," 13; Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 23; Land, "Ekphrasis and Imagination;" and Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives."

<sup>29</sup> Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Still, and notwithstanding the long history of its literary use, can *ekphrasis* be recuperated by scholars not merely as a stylistic device but as a legitimate epistemic tool? Can scholars use it to highlight the strange, distant core of bodies without risking having their work dismissed as ‘mere’ poetry, a kind of easy criticism that, as Norman Land and Svetlana Alpers have pointed out, has often been directed at earlier critics such as Aretino and Vasari?<sup>32</sup> Can ekphrastic writing be a solution for scholars who are aware of the poietic nature of their work whilst simultaneously refusing to have their writing overlooked as ‘mere’ poetry? Or, looking at the same problem from a different angle: is it possible to trace a genealogy connecting early moments of *ekphrasis* such as the ones found in Homer’s “The Shield of Achilles” with more recent styles of scholarly writing that make use of similar rhetoric and epistemic devices?

### **Evocative Writing**

Faced with the task of writing about performance, some authors have, in recent years, developed an interest in styles of writing that refuse the clinical, self-assured, analytical tone of ‘objective’ academic writing. Inspired by emergent feminist approaches to scholarly work, those new takes on writing, commonly known as performative writing, reject the primacy given to mind, reason, and judgement in the phallogocentric history of Western thought, promoting instead an awareness of the embodied character of all knowing and of its contingent nature. In other words, performative writing, as it will be demonstrated below, sets itself against the idea that there is such a thing as an ‘objective’ approach to the subject of one’s writing, an approach that, because centred in reason, is normally assumed to be independent from the writer’s position in space, time, and memory, both individual and collective. Thus, due to its being unashamedly wary of all positions of certainty and of their often silent ideological grounds, performative writing also avoids the usual interpretative drive of academic writing by not pretending to succeed in grasping the full breadth of a body. Consequently, this chapter will argue, in its openness to the contingency of all encounters, performative writing is a strong contemporary candidate for solving

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<sup>32</sup> See Land, “Ekphrasis and Imagination,” 207; and Alpers, “Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari’s Lives,” 191.

the problem one faces when having to give a voice to bodies that, very much like the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*, are either silent or no longer audible. In doing that, the remainder of the chapter will situate contemporary performative writing in a long lineage of ekphrastic writing which, in both literature and criticism, has tried to speak for that which was absent.

Writing about bodies and the ways they perform themselves to one another is, as it was argued in Chapter Two, writing about a kind of experience that is necessarily embodied and, therefore, contingent on a particular encounter. It is writing about specific translations, about specific instances of bodies playing roles for other bodies, of bodies living contingent lives and passing as the *personae* they happen to perform. Therefore, one thing that writing about bodies and their performances must achieve is to remind its readers of the ultimate strangeness of all bodies, highlighting the contingency of their *personae* and the inaccessibility of the bodies presenting themselves through them. By attempting to convey the strangeness of bodies rather than simply describing their roles or taking the latter as final truths, writing is able to get closer to the bodies about which its words are being written. That is what Benjamin must have meant when he claimed the paradoxical task of the translator to be that of translating what will always remain indecipherable.<sup>33</sup>

One way in which writing can attempt to translate the strangeness of bodies is by becoming aware of and embracing its performative character. Performance is, after all, another name for translation. That is something writers of ekphrastic poetry have known since Homer, for, as it was claimed, *ekphrasis* does nothing other than turning a body into a text that is able to speak for it. As James Francis wrote:

Far from a calm, contemplative pause [in the unfolding of the main plot of the literary work], ancient ekphrasis [...was] filled with movement on several levels, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes subverting the narrative, often calling into question the very processes of sight, language, and thought.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See above, pp. 156–158.

<sup>34</sup> Francis, “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora,” 6.

What is needed when writing about bodies, about any body, is a writing that becomes movement, writing that becomes aware of itself as the translation of a performed gesture, writing that vibrates in sympathy with the body about which it is written like the strings of a piano vibrate in sympathy with each other in order to create that *je-ne-sais-quoi* of its timbre. What is needed is a kind of writing like the one evoked by Simon O’Sullivan when trying to write about the work of Turner Prize nominee Cathy Wilkes:

With such a practice as Wilkes’s, writing’s only role—in addition to carefully documenting and describing the work (in all its ‘matter-of-factness’), and providing an account of an encounter with such work (that will necessarily be personal)—must be to somehow accompany the work, to *seize upon certain aspects and to amplify or develop them*. This might involve writing as itself a kind of fiction, *writing that produces the same ‘structure of feeling,’ the same constellation of affect.*<sup>35</sup>

O’Sullivan’s words are crucial at this point and highlight some of the features of the writing that is being called performative. As a form of ekphrastic writing, performative writing goes beyond ‘matters of factness,’ beyond the comforts that stem from taking contingencies for final truths. In doing so, it is a writing that tends to stress the dependency of ‘facts’ on particular configurations of observing apparatuses and observed realities, on arrangements of performing bodies and bodies that witness. The way it often goes about that is by providing an unashamedly personal and, therefore, contingent, account of the encounter. However, as O’Sullivan also notes, personal accounts are not enough to evoke the subject of one’s writing and, therefore, even if performative writing is usually associated with the personal and the autobiographical, it mustn’t be reduced to it. Personal accounts of encounters are not enough to bring-forth or enact the ultimate strangeness of bodies.

According to Jeffrey Williams, the autobiographical turn in criticism can be traced back to Jane Tompkins’ 1987 essay “Me and My Shadow,” a text in which the author built a passionate argument against the post-Kantian idea that, in order to remain valid, knowledge must transcend the domain of the private and

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<sup>35</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, “Ten Concepts Following Cathy Wilkes’ Practice,” *Afterall* 12 (2005): 65 (emphasis added).

personal.<sup>36</sup> That need for knowledge to transcend the personal was seen by Tompkins as a symptom of the broader conflict between the public realm of knowledge and the private realm of feeling which, in her words, was also a “founding condition of female oppression.”<sup>37</sup> Still, Tompkins’ essay is not only important for what it says, but for how it says it (or, following the argument of this chapter, it is through its ‘how’ that Tompkins’ text is able to provide its readers with a glimpse of its ‘what’). For instance, in one of its passages, Tompkins wrote:

Intellectual debate if it were in the right spirit would be wonderful. But I don’t know how to be in the right spirit, exactly, can’t make points without sounding kind of superior and smug. Most of all, I don’t know how to enter the debate without leaving everything else behind—the birds outside my window, my grief over Janice, just myself as a person sitting here in stocking feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom. But not going yet.<sup>38</sup>

However, even if, by inaugurating the personal or autobiographical turn in criticism, Tompkins has highlighted the contingent character of all encounters and, therefore, of all criticality, writing autobiographically is not enough to successfully evoke the strangeness of bodies or to achieve what Peggy Phelan called the “summoning [of the] the incorporeal.”<sup>39</sup> By that, Phelan meant that the main task one faces when writing about performance is that of somehow making present the body about which one is trying to write whilst, simultaneously, being aware that the body is and will forever remain out of reach. In her words:

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<sup>36</sup> See Jeffrey Williams, “The New Belletrism,” *Style* 33, no. 3 (1999): 414–442. For the Kantian origin of that paradigm, one that equates knowledge with the public use of reason, see Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, 3–7.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” *New Literary History* 19, no. 1 (1987): 169.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

One of the deepest challenges of writing about performance is that the object of one's meditation, the performance itself, disappears. In this sense, performance theory and criticism are instances of writing history.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, as it has been claimed in the previous chapter, there is a divergence between the way in which Phelan viewed the absence of the object of one's writing and the argument of this thesis. The difference between Phelan's approach to the absence of the body and the one being put forward here is that, while Phelan's body is absent in the moment of writing because it has once been present and has since then disappeared into memory, the body in this thesis is distant and has always been so. Thus, the approach to writing being claimed here is itself different from Phelan's: whilst Phelan's writing mourns a lost object and lives, by consequence, in the past, the approach to writing being defended in this chapter is marked by an unconditional drive forward, by an eroticisation of the future. This is writing based on the conviction that, whatever happens, each step of the way will bring bodies closer than they have ever been before, even if never close enough to grasp. It is a writing that longs for future glimpses of that which has always been distant rather than a writing that mourns that which was present and has now been lost. To go back to the argument of the Introduction, this is not the mourning of a lost 'Nature;' it is the scary and yet unavoidable realisation that 'Nature' has never been there. It is also, nevertheless, a writing that, very much like Phelan's, is concerned with writing history, albeit in a different manner. Not history as remembrance of the past but history as the making and remaking of the past through a permanent evocation of the future; history first and foremost as *historia*, as the account of one's run towards what one will never be able to reach. History, yes, but history as the kind of 'afterlife' that is aware of its nature as 'after-death.'

Still, despite approaching it with from a slightly different angle, Phelan's reflections on writing about performance are extremely useful in the context of this dissertation. As O'Sullivan noted when reflecting on the task of writing about Wilkes' work, Phelan also believed that writing must become something more than a description or a record of one's personal encounter with a body. Writing must attempt to translate into words the "affective outline" of that encounter, it

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.

must try to evoke the strangeness of that specific body.<sup>41</sup> The way to do this, Phelan claimed, is by remembering how to “love the words the harder way: not ‘for themselves,’ since they were supremely for us, but for the more-in-them-than-themselves,” i.e., by using words for what, in them, exceeds their direct meaning.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, writing is taken a step further than Tompkins’ autobiographical writing, and allows the body being translated to emerge as the body of a stranger. Consequently, and like a shaman, the writer becomes a vehicle for that which cannot speak whilst never forgetting that his or her words will never be able to replace the body in the name of which they are spoken. As Phelan, herself, wrote:

Performative writing is different from personal criticism or autobiographical essay, although it owes a lot to both genres. [...] Rather than describing the performance event in ‘direct signification,’ a task I believe to be impossible and not terrifically interesting, I want this *writing to enact the affective force of the performance* event again [...]. Performative writing is solicitous of affect even while it is nervous and tentative about the consequences of that solicitation. Alternatively bold and coy, manipulative and unconscious, this writing *points both to itself and to the ‘scenes’ that motivate it*.<sup>43</sup>

If performative writing is the most efficient way of conveying a sense of the strangeness of all bodies even at the moment of their encounter, it remains to understand what exactly does performative writing entail, what are its most commonly used strategies; what kinds of evocative, quasi-shamanic tools does it have at its disposal in order to function as a map or road sign that, as *ekphrasis*, points in the direction of a body as its ever distant and, therefore, strange horizon.

One of the texts that better answers those questions is Della Pollock’s 1998 essay “Performing Writing.” In it, Pollock presented what she termed “six excursions into performative writing,” an attempt at sketching the defining

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11–12 (emphasis added).

features of the style.<sup>44</sup> According to her, performative writing is “*evocative*,” “*metonymic*,” “*subjective*,” “*nervous*,” “*citational*,” and “*consequential*.”<sup>45</sup> However, of those six traits, two acquire more importance in the context of the argument being developed here. Although performative writing is indeed “*subjective*” because it embraces the contingency of all encounters, “*citational*” because it points to a reality that is not present, “*nervous*” because it is aware of the impossibility of ever making the body about which it writes fully present, and “*consequential*” because it affects one’s perception of a given body, the two characteristics that are most telling of the rhetorical devices used in performative writing are its “*evocative*” and “*metonymic*” aspects.

Metonymy is the figure of speech whereby a body is referred to not by its name but by the name of another body with which it is contiguous. Example: When “the kettle is boiling,” what is actually boiling is the water adjacent to it. Therefore, according to Pollock, performative writing is metonymic because it is “a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering” of its referent.<sup>46</sup> A similar claim could also be made from the standpoint of Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology, namely from its thesis that the “the withdrawn object is always more than what we perceive of it.”<sup>47</sup> However, if, according to Harman, all relations are already metonymic because all access to “real objects” is always mediated by a “sensual object” with which they are contiguous, then metonymy alone cannot trigger an awareness of the “real object” that hides behind its sensual double or, in the terms of this dissertation, an awareness of the body camouflaged by its performed *persona*. That is where metaphor comes in as the rhetorical device that is responsible for pointing towards the strangeness of bodies and for giving performative writing its evocative character. As Della Pollock wrote:

Performative writing is *evocative*. It operates metaphorically to render absence present—to bring the reader into contact with “other-worlds,” to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as

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<sup>44</sup> Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 80.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–94.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Graham Harman, “Dwelling With the Fourfold,” *Space and Culture* 12 (2009): 301.

such by re-marking them. Performative writing evokes worlds that are other-wise [*sic*] intangible, unlocatable.<sup>48</sup>

Like metonymy, metaphor also establishes a relation between two bodies that encounter one another but, unlike the former, it does not require contiguity. In metaphor, bodies are, instead, summoned through association. In other words, when using metaphor, the writer evokes a body by referring to another body with which the former shares some qualities. By writing “the city is a jungle,” for instance, the writer is not replacing the city with the jungle adjacent to it; rather, he or she is pointing to the strangeness of the city by depriving it of its expected qualities and then associating it with qualities belonging to another body from which it is detached, in this case, the jungle.

Harman, too, recognises the important role played by metaphor in summoning the withdrawn reality of his “objects:”

For this sort of pointing, let’s use the general term ‘allure,’ for a thing becomes alluring when it seems to be a ghostly power exceeding any of its lists of properties, one that animates those properties from within by means of some ill-defined demonic energy. Allure splits an object from its qualities. [...] We see it in metaphor, in which ‘man is a wolf’ [...] seems to split the human from his qualities and replace them with wolf-qualities.<sup>49</sup>

In the terms of this dissertation, by forcing the split of a body from its *persona*, metaphor is able to point towards the core of that body that lies beyond the contingency of any role it might play. If the body survives that split, then it means that the body is not reducible to any of its performances and is, therefore, ultimately strange.

In conclusion, this chapter has tried to find an answer to the epistemological problem posed by the realisation that bodies will always remain strangers to one another despite their tight ecological entanglement, i.e. their ability to affect each other. If all bodies are essentially strange, then existing paradigms of knowledge will have to find a way of embracing the ultimate contingency of the world whilst nonetheless being able to make claims of truth about the reality of

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<sup>48</sup> Pollock, “Performing Writing,” 80.

<sup>49</sup> Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 137.

bodies and the conditions of their encounter, however tentatively and temporarily. One way the Arts and Humanities scholar has to go about that, this chapter has argued, is through a reawakening to the ekphrastic power of metaphor and performative writing as legitimate technologies of knowledge that, in their working as both *technē* and *poiēsis*, are able to highlight the contingent nature of all encounters and, therefore, bring forward the strangeness of all bodies. In doing so, the scholar becomes an important interlocutor with the scientist and no longer its enemy or annoying sibling. By embracing the performative aspect of their writing and no longer scared of being labeled 'mere' poets, scholars are able to portray a world made of bodies that are simultaneously entangled and estranged, in resonance with, and no longer against, recent postulates of disciplines such as theoretical physics.<sup>50</sup> Thus, rather than being an instance of post-structuralist or even 'postmodern' self-centred 'belletrism' devoid of content as so many have claimed, performative writing is a legitimate form of communication that, in reenacting the performative nature of all encounters, is able to function as a vehicle of truth, albeit one that, rather than aiming at clarity and universal certainty, has noise, strangeness, and contingency as its only postulates.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For more on this argument's relation to theoretical physics, see above, pp. 118–119, especially note 228.

<sup>51</sup> For examples of some of the negative views on contemporary forms of writing known as 'performative' or 'art writing,' in particular in relation to its use as a form of art criticism, see Baker, George *et al.*, "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (2002): 200–228; and Charlesworth, JJ, "What has happened to art criticism?," *Spiked*, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/1265>.

## —FOUR—

***Blue, or Performing Metaphor***

*I fill this room with the echo of many voices  
Who passed time here  
Voices unlocked from the blue of the long dried paint  
—Derek Jarman<sup>1</sup>*

In the previous chapter, a case was made for performative writing to be embraced as a valid technology of knowledge, one that, following the tradition of ekphrastic writing, makes use of metaphor for highlighting the strangeness of all bodies. No longer associated with the tropes of subjectivity, relativism, or social constructivism that have marked the post-structuralist critical project and postmodern aesthetics, metaphor appeared as a legitimate strategy for accessing a world in which bodies are increasingly entangled in one another whilst remaining estranged and, therefore, irreducible to the roles they play in each encounter.

The chapter that now follows will analyse an example of metaphor being used to point in the direction of the unspeakable core of bodies. That example is Derek Jarman's *Blue*, a film that facilitates several performative encounters and that is, itself, a successful instance of performative writing bringing forth the strangeness of its subject. The reasons behind the choice of a film as the main case-study in a dissertation focused in the notion of performance are manifold: Firstly, using a work that is not normally associated with performance—not only because it is a film but also because it does not show any actors performing on screen—comes in line with the stated aim of this project, i.e. that of pursuing an ecological redefinition of performance that goes beyond human performances

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film* (London: Channel 4 Television and BBC Radio 3), 10.

and the so-called ‘performing arts.’ Secondly, Derek Jarman’s *Blue* is, as it will be argued, first and foremost an essay on epistemology, a work that not only is concerned with a subject that is difficult to grasp—HIV/AIDS—but also a work concerned with knowledge, its conditions, and its possibility. Thirdly, *Blue* deserves being discussed much more than it has been: at the time of the writing of this dissertation, the number of critical essays and monographs widely available on such important work of late 20th-century cinema could be counted by the fingers of both hands and mostly addressed a readership primarily concerned with the cultural impact of HIV/AIDS, queer theory, or both. However, as this chapter will make clear, *Blue*’s importance as both a film made by a visual artist and a quasi-philosophical meditation on the conditions and limits of knowledge goes well beyond the specificity of those areas of concern. That is due to the fact that, as it will be seen, *Blue* is a metaphor for all knowledge that emerges out of all encounters with a world made of both human and nonhuman bodies enmeshed in one another with no prejudice to their absolute strangeness.

Thus, in order to argue for the importance of *Blue* as a metaphysical meditation, this chapter will start with a small introductory section inspired by Derek Jarman’s diaries and the text of *Blue*. Following from that, a short history of the film will be presented, including Jarman’s intentions while making it, as well as the problems concerning the public representations of HIV/AIDS he was trying to address. Finally, through an analysis of the crucial role played by metaphor throughout the film—both visually in the form of the monochromatic screen and aurally in the text read by the actors and in the film’s sound-effects—the chapter will claim that the film reenacts four major performative encounters: the encounter between Jarman and Yves Klein’s ultramarine blue, the encounter between Jarman and his alter-ego character named Blue, the encounter between Jarman and AIDS, and, finally, the encounter between *Blue*’s audience and the AIDS pandemic. In reenacting those four encounters, *Blue* highlights the nature, conditions, and limits of knowledge while still being able to convey something of the reality which it tries to grasp in all its strangeness.

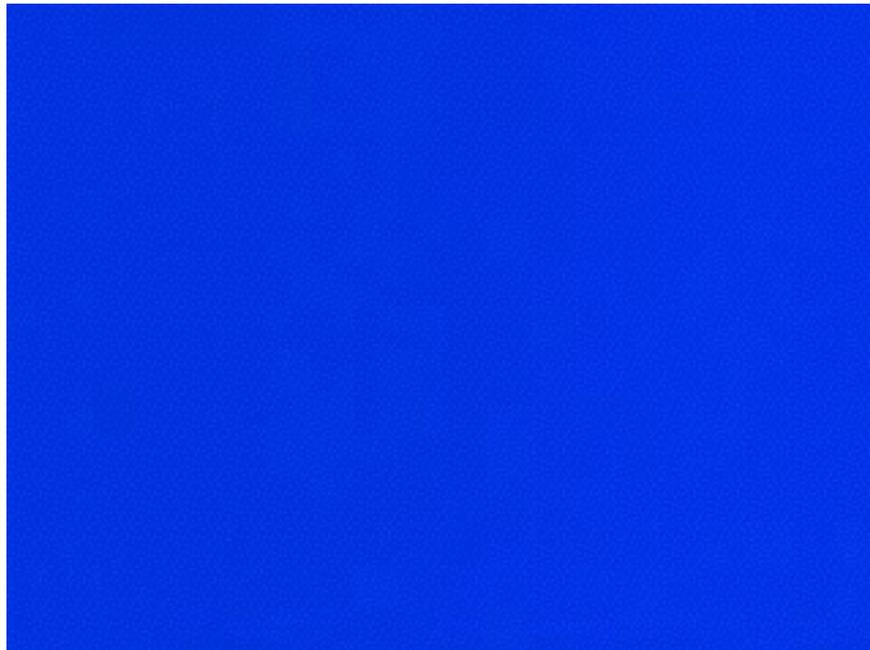


Fig. 24: Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993. Film Still.

### Wednesday, 23

As I sit here, *Blue* playing in front of me, coming after me from the depths of the all-powerful home cinema speakers, the sky has suddenly opened up over London and the clouds have gone leaving behind the sky-blue that the painter tries, unsuccessfully, to reproduce. However, there is no painting in this room; only the voices of John, Nigel, Tilda, and Derek bathing in the flickering ultramarine blue of the screen. (Or is it the other way around?)

Still, home is not the cinema and the sky today is cyan, at best celeste, but definitely not ultramarine.

Last night, in an attempt to join the others and bathe myself in blue as well as in words, I tried to overcome the atmospheric barriers and those posed by affordable televisual technology by laying in bed, C.M. next to me, with all the lights off and *Blue* playing off the larger than life computer screen sat on the desk in the corner of the room.

*O Blue come forth*

*O Blue arise*

*O Blue ascend*

*O Blue come in<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 3.

Blue came forth and filled the bedroom with all the intensity of electromagnetic ultramarine and with the tranquility of words flowing—sometimes as whispers, sometimes as shouts—out of the mouths of all those who have finally resigned themselves to their inability to speak. C.M. asked me “What is it about?” I looked at him (what a silly question... Had he not read the title?):

—It is about blue.

### **June, 1993**

*Blue* came out less than a year before Derek Jarman died of an AIDS-related illness in February 1994. According to Tim Lawrence, the film premiered without any hype in June of the previous year at the Venice Biennale with “Jarman himself, a single reporter, a small audience, and seventy-six minutes of unchanging blue celluloid backed by a soundtrack about the director’s experience of living and dying with AIDS.”<sup>3</sup> In Lawrence’s opinion, there was an explanation for the quiet nature of the first-ever screening of Jarman’s last film at Lido’s Palazzo del Cinema: that same evening, at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, a few *vaporetto* stops away on the Canal Grande and home of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Elizabeth Taylor was making her own bit of glitzy AIDS history by presiding over “Art against AIDS,” a charity gala where each place at the fine dining table fetched US\$2,500 for the American Foundation for AIDS Research.<sup>4</sup> Faced with the choice of sitting through seventy-six minutes of flickering ultramarine blue, hospital and war sounds, and fragments of text on AIDS, blindness and death read in the first person by John Quentin, Nigel Terry, Tilda Swinton and Derek Jarman, or paying US\$2,500 for dining in the company of Elizabeth Taylor and the likes of Chaka Khan, Yoko Ono, and Valentino, all with the extra reassurance that one was doing ‘good,’ that one was ‘helping,’ the ‘right’ choice wasn’t certainly that hard to make.<sup>5</sup> As Tony Peake noted, quoting a *Time Out* report of that same month, “the glitterati were at Peggy Guggenheim’s, ogling Liz Taylor as she presided over a gala dinner and auction

<sup>3</sup> Tim Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman’s *Blue*,” *Social Text* 15, no. 3&4 (1997): 241.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.* for information on the guests present at the gala dinner.

—the fundraising ‘Art Against AIDS’.”<sup>6</sup> To most of the press following what was the 45th edition of the Venice Biennale, AIDS was neither about Jarman nor was it about *Blue*. Instead, it was all about Liz, who, according to the press, sported a “chic chiffon outfit adorned with a diamond necklace” while parading herself along the marble foyers and brocade walls.<sup>7</sup> Death and uncertainty had been turned into glitz and glamour. The following was, according to Lawrence, what *Newsday* had to say about the event:

Elizabeth Taylor brought her deep tan, her even deeper cleavage, and her fierce anti-AIDS stance to Venice last weekend. [...] Despite the heat, the paparazzi and Elizabeth’s chronically painful back, the happenings were a great success and Miz Liz was in fine, cooperative fettle.<sup>8</sup>

According to that report, in Venice, that day, there was no ‘black cancer,’ no blindness, no hospital rooms, no night sweats, no IV drips, no *Blue*; just pure lush and class.

### **Evoking the Strange Within**

Known for his extremely critical views on television, the epitome of the “spurious egalitarianism and lack of concentration of the media,” consumer culture, and for his ambivalent relationship with mainstream cinema and its use of narrative, Derek Jarman had, on several occasions, preferred to consider himself a painter working with other languages such as cinema and poetry.<sup>9</sup> Also, given his own self-styling as an “old-fashioned conservative” artist with statements such as “Politically I am not a Tory. Culturally I am. My art has always been Tory” and “The older I get, the more I believe in tradition,” and given the

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<sup>6</sup> Peake, Tony. *Derek Jarman* (London: Abacus, 2001), 524.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman’s *Blue*,” 241.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (London: Vintage, 1992), 82, 177. For details on Jarman’s relationship with mainstream cinema and for how both the artist and the critics thought of himself as primarily a painter, see Steven Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 2–4; Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman’s *Blue*,” 248; Peter Wollen, “Blue,” *New Left Review* 6 (2000): 123; and Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman’s Angelic Conversations* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.

influence artists such as William Blake had on his work, Jarman is today considered one of the heirs of English Romanticism as well as a prominent figure of the New Romantics movement of the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence of all that, it comes as no surprise that the artist held extremely negative views on popular culture and on the representations of AIDS and of People with AIDS (PWA) circulating in the Western media during the 1980s and early '90s. At one point in *Blue*, for instance, Jarman can be heard, through the voice of one of his actors, saying the following:

I shall not win the battle against the virus—in spite of the slogans like 'Living with AIDS.' The virus was appropriated by the well—so we have to live with AIDS while they spread the quilt for the moths of Ithaca across the wine dark sea.

Awareness is heightened by this, but something else is lost. A sense of reality drowned in theatre.<sup>11</sup>

With that passage, Jarman announced, loud and clear, the reservations he held on the famous AIDS Memorial Quilt and what he classed as its theatrics of remembrance. The quilt, at present made of more than 47,000 individual 3-by-6 foot memorial panels, was initiated in 1987 as a way of both celebrating and remembering the lives of those who have died of AIDS-related illnesses, and worked as a counterpoint to the images of suffering and dying PWAs that were mass circulated in the media at the height of the AIDS crisis.<sup>12</sup> Such a counterpoint was badly needed as most of the images of dying PWAs that circulated at the time were only able to evoke pity along with, undoubtedly, fear and horror. In the opinion of Douglas Crimp, what was needed in order to balance those out from both from a social and a public health point of view, were, instead, images that were able to trigger solidarity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Lawrence, "AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*," 246–247; and Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009): 219–221.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> See The Names Project Foundation, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt," accessed June 2, 2013, <http://www.aidsquilt.org>.

<sup>13</sup> See Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 99.

Notwithstanding the above, in Jarman's opinion the shift from pity-inducing photographs of dying PWAs to solidarity-evoking memorial quilts was doing nothing to publicly unveil the true reality of living with AIDS. Instead, what the AIDS Quilt was doing was yet again masquerading reality with spectacle:

All art failed [in portraying AIDS]. [...] When the AIDS quilt came to Edinburgh during the film festival, I attended just out of duty. I could see it was an emotional work, it got the heartstrings. But when the panels were unveiled a truly awful ceremony took place, in which a group of what looked like refrigerated karate experts, all dressed in white, turned and chanted some mumbo jumbo—horrible, quasi-religious, false. I shall haunt anyone who ever makes a panel for me.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the challenge, for Jarman, was to talk about AIDS and about his own experience of it without falling in either of the two traps; without, in other words, adopting the strategies of mass-circulated portrayals of PWAs in their death beds as individualised doomed promiscuous white male bodies deprived of personhood and subjectivity; but also without going along with public rituals of remembrance and their “mumbo jumbo” aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> Jarman's aim was that of bringing his own private experience as a PWA into the public realm without letting it become a simple and depoliticised account of the struggle of an individualised body with the disease killing it, nor a broad public statement that, due to the high levels of generalisation and abstraction it would necessarily require, would end up diluting the reality of his own private daily battles with both HIV and opportunistic fellows such as all the AIDS-related illnesses of both individual and social bodies.

That difficult rubbing of, and negotiation between, private and public realms was already, at the time of *Blue's* premiere, a core feature of Jarman's work. As the artist, himself, is quoted saying:

My world is in fragments, smashed in pieces so fine I doubt I will ever reassemble them. So I scabble in the rubbish, an archaeologist who stumbles across a buried film. An archaeologist who projects his private

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Garden* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 91.

<sup>15</sup> See Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*,” 243.

world along a beam of light into the arena, till all goes dark at the end of the performance, and we go home... Now you project your private world into the public arena and produce the flashpoint; the attrition between the private and public world, is the tradition you discover. All you can do is point the direction that everyone in the audience who wishes to “travel” has to take.<sup>16</sup>

As that passage demonstrates, Jarman positioned his own work half way between the two poles of private and public, inside and outside, concrete and abstract and it was also there, between those poles, that *Blue* realised its promise of bridging internal battles with an unbeatable killer virus and external social representations and collective epistemologies.

Writing about the necessity of bridging those two sides of AIDS, which he called the “two epidemics,” George Piggford defined the first, “empirical” one, as the one that takes place within a particular human body and with which medical practice is usually most concerned, and the second, “tropic” one, as the one concerned with the social body, popular discourse, and its strategies of signification.<sup>17</sup> However, as the author went on to say:

From the vantage of most AIDS theory, the first [tropic] epidemic is the only one to which we must be most carefully attentive, but in the subjectivities of those for whom AIDS signifies an everyday struggle, the second [empirical] seems much more real.<sup>18</sup>

The problem Jarman faced when creating *Blue* was that most existing discourses on AIDS tended to privilege one of its sides in detriment of the other. In other words, when looking for portrayals of HIV/AIDS, what was common to find during the late 1980s and early '90s were two diametrically opposed narratives positing themselves against each other: either AIDS was a private, concrete and individual, health condition or it was a public and abstract

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<sup>16</sup> Jarman quoted in Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 220.

<sup>17</sup> See George Piggford, “‘In Time of Plague:’ AIDS and its Significations in Hervé Guibert, Tony Kushner, and Thom Gunn,” *Cultural Critique* 44 (2000): 178. Also, for more on what Piggford called the “tropic epidemic” see Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 1, particularly in relation to what the author called an “epidemic of signification.”

<sup>18</sup> Piggford, “‘In Time of Plague,’” 178.

representation that lived in popular discourse. By adopting any of those positions, the reality of HIV/AIDS was explained away either by reducing it to its parts, i.e. the entry of HIV in the body, the reverse transcription of viral RNA into DNA, the integration of viral DNA into the host cell's DNA and so on until the appearance of the first opportunistic infections and the eventual death of the infected body; or by pretending to exhaust its being at the level of its manifestations in public consciousness as the “gay plague” or “God’s punishment of our weaknesses.”<sup>19</sup> However, either solution was untenable for it was unable to deal with the full dimensions of AIDS as a body existing in the world alongside humans, prawn cocktails, Margaret Thatcher’s hats, accumulation of capital, exploitation, and strawberry milkshakes. Reducing it to either a series of microscopic biological and chemical processes or to a set of macroscopic apparatuses of signification and production of the Self could only explain AIDS away and, therefore, never really grasp the full scope of the crisis and of the lives of those most affected by it. In other words, in Graham Harman’s terms, the dominant approaches to HIV/AIDS had mostly been marked by either an “undermining” or an “overmining” of its existence. As Harman explained:

One option is to claim that objects are unreal because they are derivative of something deeper—objects are too superficial to be truth. This is the more cutting-edge version of those recent European philosophies that have a certain realist flavor. The other and more familiar option, anti-realist in character, is to say that objects are unreal because they are useless fictions compared with what is truly evident in them—whether this be qualities, events, actions, effects, or givenness to human access. Here objects are declared too falsely deep to be the truth. [...] While the first approach ‘undermines’ objects by trying to go deeper, we can coin a term and say that the second strategy ‘overmines’ objects by calling them too deep.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Harman, “On The Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 24.

In the particular case of the AIDS crisis in the early '90s, the trouble with those approaches was that infected people were 1) still suffering and dying regardless of how much AIDS was overmined as a product of language and collective apparatuses of signification, and 2) they were still being taken to represent a taxon of unclean people regardless of how much the condition was undermined by scientific empiricism. A decade after the first diagnosis, AIDS was striving, ungraspable but always present, unable to be grabbed by microscopes, AZT, or by one's favourite post-structuralist game.

The question was, then, how to draw a path between scientific naturalism with its breaking down of reality into ever small parts, and social relativism with its reduction of reality to a made-up product of (human, all too human) formations of power and knowledge. In other words, how to open a space for thinking AIDS somewhere between its reality as a private chemical battle against a virus and its being a public political war against stigma and discrimination. Within that context, Jarman's project emerged, like the artist himself noted above, as a pointing-towards, a signalling that one's campaign must head in the direction of some unfathomable destination, half way between the concrete private reality of a body living—and struggling, and dying—with AIDS, and the abstract public dimension of an epidemic being made sense through popular discourse.<sup>21</sup> While doing that, *Blue* would also constitute itself as a meditation on the impossibility of ever grasping AIDS fully: no matter how close to it one gets, one will always remain somewhat blind to it although, at times, it is blindness itself that allows for better seeing.

Hence the reason why, according to Lawrence, "*Blue* is in fact three films rolled into one."<sup>22</sup> Those three filmic strands which Jarman interwove with one another in order to create *Blue* are 1) a biographical account of the artist's own life with AIDS, of his AIDS-related blindness caused by an opportunistic cytomegalovirus infection, of his first-hand experience of AIDS medical care, and his own thoughts on his imminent death; 2) a reflection on the broad difficulties faced by someone trying to represent AIDS; and 3) the development of blue, the colour,

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<sup>21</sup> See Derek Jarman's quote above, pp. 178–179.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence, "AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*," 249. Lawrence's claim is also supported by other critics and by Jarman, himself. See, for instance: Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film*, 229; Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 127, 137.

as a metaphor via the insertion of a character called Blue, a little boy standing as a fictional version of Jarman himself.<sup>23</sup>

However, despite Lawrence's very convincing analysis and division of the film's structure, in the context of the argument being unfolded in this chapter, it is more useful to divide the film into four, rather than three, different strands. The reasons for that have only to do with the fact that this dissertation is being guided by a series of concerns that is rather different from the ones that appear to ground Lawrence's analysis. Whereas, in his division of the film in three different narrative sections, Lawrence could be said to have restricted himself to a literalist reading of the film (as, indeed, those are the three literal narratives that make *Blue*), the division of the film's structure into four parts proposed in this chapter was the result of a reading of the film primarily as a performing metaphor, one that is not only aligned with the argument of the previous chapter of this dissertation, but that also reflects the important role played by metaphor in Jarman's work. However, before dividing *Blue* into four parts according to its metaphoric strategies, it is worth examining how metaphor is used in the film as an alternative to both the undermining and overmining that has become characteristic of dominant epistemologies of AIDS.

### **AIDS as Metaphor**

Metaphor plays a very important role in *Blue* due to Jarman's constant use of that figure of rhetoric in his attempt to make his audience (and himself) grasp the reality of AIDS. Metaphor is, in *Blue*, first epistemology. There is not one single occasion throughout the seventy-six minutes of film in which AIDS is addressed or described in a 'literal' manner. Instead, rather than trying to portray the pandemic with all the certainties of a supposedly 'realistic' approach, Jarman used a flickering International Klein Blue screen, a haunting soundtrack made of commissioned music and ambient sounds, his telling of the adventures of the fictional boy named Blue, and his own everyday experiences of medical care, hospital waiting rooms, blindness, and the side-effects of medication, as strategies to convey something about AIDS and his own dying of it that would

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<sup>23</sup> See Lawrence, "AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*," 249.

transcend both medical knowledge and mass-circulated views on the epidemic. As Roger Hallas noted, not only was metaphor the main actor in Jarman's film rhetoric, but it was also an epistemological tool found in many works by other artists dealing with the reality of AIDS and the problem of its representation. In Hallas words:

As much as *Blue* permits me access to the subjective space of the witness, the acoustic and optical qualities produced by the film's screening in physical space prevent me from either pinning down the other with my eyes and my ears or forgetting my own embodiment. Such witnessing dynamics reveal a resonance between Jarman's film and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's AIDS-themed installation art, which *foregrounds corporeality just as it displaces the visual figuration of the body onto metaphor and trace*.<sup>24</sup>

Such a need for the use of metaphoric strategies in so-called 'AIDS art' had come as a result of the realisation, on the part of the artists involved, that the full dimensions of AIDS would always remain too big and ineffable, too strange even for the person living with it, to allow any attempts at being portrayed in a realistic aesthetics. No portrait of a dying man would ever be able to convey the disease hosted within him nor the full dimensions of a pandemic spreading across the globe from San Francisco to London, Paris to Johannesburg; from the dropping CD4 counts of those infected to the shock tactics of tabloid newspapers and the growing myths surrounding both infection and cure; from the lack of proper political response to the denialism found in the most obscene instances of the surrounding rhetoric. AIDS was, in the early 1990s, a reality that was only ever encountered in character, through one of its symptoms, one of its *personae*, be it the Kaposi's Sarcoma appearing on someone's skin or the acts of civil disobedience staged regularly by activist groups like ACT UP. Even its medical designation ultimately denounces its ungraspability: AIDS can only be recognised tangentially through forensic operations, through reading a series of clues. AIDS is a syndrome, a series of symptoms that, only because they happen concurrently, point to the presence of a specific reality lying underneath. And so, like the territory that cannot be replaced by its map, so the full reality of

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<sup>24</sup> Halas, *Reframing Bodies*, 230 (emphasis added).

AIDS will always remain inaccessible even to someone who has, willingly or unwillingly, encountered one of its many manifestations: from mappings of the HIV genome to the *pneumocystis* pneumonia that fills one's lungs; from public displays of the AIDS Memorial Quilt to the angst caused by the sight of Tom Hanks' character in *Philadelphia* listening to Maria Callas. That, too, is a view that Jarman appeared to share:

No ninety minutes could deal with the eight years HIV takes to get its host. Hollywood can only sentimentalise it, it would all take place in some well-heeled west-coast beach hut, the reality would drive the audience out of the cinema and no one viewpoint could mirror the 10,000 lives lost in San Francisco to date, so we are left with documentaries and diaries like mine and even they cannot tell you of the constant, all-consuming nagging, of the aches and pains. How many times I've stopped to touch my inflamed face even while writing this page, there's nothing grand about it, no opera here, just the daily grind in a minor key. But in spite of that we would wish our lives to be recorded in an oratorio by a Beethoven or Mozart not in the auction sale of Keith Haring tea towels.<sup>25</sup>

Jarman's awareness of the difficulty or even impossibility of grasping and portraying AIDS brings to mind what object-oriented philosophers such as Graham Harman or Ian Bogost have written about the nature of relations between what they call "objects." As it was already seen in Chapter Two, according to Object-Oriented Ontology, "objects" can only relate to one another through a sensual version of themselves acting as a vicar. That thesis, central for Object-Oriented Ontology, has served as one of the crucial foundations for the development of the expanded notion of performance undertaken above. Still according to object-oriented ontologists, because "objects" withdraw from direct relations, full access to their being, or, in the terms of this dissertation, to the performer behind the performance, remains an impossible task, giving "objects" no other option than to appear to each other as what Timothy Morton called a "strange stranger:"

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<sup>25</sup> Derek Jarman quoted in Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 514–515. That passage can also be found, albeit in an abridged version, in Derek Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, ed. Keith Collins (London: Vintage, 2001), 290.

The strange stranger [...] is something or someone whose existence we cannot anticipate. Even when strange strangers showed up, even if they lived with us for a thousand years, we might never know them fully—and we would never know whether we had exhausted our getting-to-know process. We wouldn't know what we did not know about them—these aspects would be unknown unknowns [...]. They might be living with us right now. They might, indeed, be us. That is what is so strange about them. We can never tell.<sup>26</sup>

AIDS is one of those strangers. It is even, perhaps, and in a rather strange way, the strangest of strangers because it is a stranger that lives within: so close to the point of being able to steal one's life, but yet so distant that it won't ever allow a "pleased to meet you" followed by a cordial shake of hands and a nice cup of tea. If, indeed, AIDS is the strangest of strangers, what tools does the artist or thinker have at his or her disposal to tackle such body? How is it possible to simultaneously avoid both the failure of documentary photography and the sentimentality of Tom Hanks' character dying to Giordano's "La Mamma Morta"? How can one escape the "mumbo-jumbo" aesthetics of the AIDS Memorial Quilt whilst being able to highlight, in an ecological manner, the strangeness of AIDS as well as the ways in which, despite the theatrical distance at which it is encountered, it is able to enmesh itself in bodies, biological, social, and political? The answer, for Derek Jarman, like for the object-oriented ontologists after him, came in the form of metaphor.<sup>27</sup>

By using metaphor as the principal device of his film rhetoric, Derek Jarman aimed to highlight the unfathomable reality of AIDS beyond the contingency of its *personae*. By refusing to take on a 'realist' aesthetics, Jarman tackled AIDS not in the style of the mass-mediated 'documentary' portrayals of dying young men—always deemed to fail in their attempt to frame reality—but, instead, in a way that constituted itself as a kind of metareality, i.e. as a reflection on the performative nature of all encounters with AIDS and on the impossibility of ever making AIDS fully visible beyond the contingency of its medical, social, or

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<sup>26</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 42.

<sup>27</sup> See p. 170 above, for Graham Harman's association of metaphor with what he termed "allure."

political symptoms. In short, in having metaphor as his weapon of choice, Jarman was able to present AIDS as a stranger.

### **Blindness as Metaphor**

According to the above, and in order to maximise its evocative potential, Jarman used metaphor in various different occasions and at various different levels throughout *Blue*. In its soundtrack, for instance, there is a constant vertigo-inducing shift between private and public realms, with sounds of hospital equipment immediately following those of buzzing public spaces such as cafés and busy roads. Unsurprisingly, Jarman himself claimed, in the statement already quoted above, that his aim was to produce some kind of generative contrast or friction between private and public worlds, between interior and exterior realities.<sup>28</sup> As Steven Dillon saw it, in *Blue* “sound does not support a three-dimensional world, but rather appears as supporting or contrasting annotation, and so allows fluid and instantaneous movement between radically disconnected points.”<sup>29</sup>

However, that movement of friction between disconnected realities is nowhere more evident than in the actual text of the film, where there are plenty of literary metaphors right from the beginning:

The doctor in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital thought he could detect lesions in my retina—the pupils dilated with belladonna—the torch shone into them with a terrible blinding light.

Look left

Look down

Look up

Look right

Blue flashes in my eyes.

Blue Bottle buzzing

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<sup>28</sup> See above, pp. 178–179.

<sup>29</sup> Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film*, 236.

Lazy days  
 The sky blue butterfly  
 Sways on the cornflower  
 Lost in the warmth  
 Of the blue heat haze  
 Singing the blues  
 Quiet and slowly  
 Blue of my heart  
 Blue of my dreams  
 Slow blue love  
 Of delphinium days<sup>30</sup>

With such a constant, almost obsessive friction between separate realities—Jarman’s private experience of having his pupils dilated with belladonna *versus* the sky-blue butterflies in an unidentified outside swaying on the cornflower and quietly singing the blues on the blue heat haze—the artist worked metaphor to the extreme. As it was seen in the previous chapter and expanding Harman’s thesis, metaphor allows bodies to detach themselves from their contingent *personae*. In doing so, it is able to, albeit tangentially, reveal that there is an essential and yet withdrawn core in all bodies that survives their being stripped of their masks.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in occasions of metaphor, readers or audiences are made aware of the strange presence of bodies not through delusions of immediate contact but through the stressing of the indexicality of all masks, of all performed *personae*. Therefore, in the passage of *Blue* just quoted what the audience is left with is an awareness of the incommensurability of Jarman’s developing blindness thanks to the collision of the the blue light flashing in his CMV-ridden eyes and the sky-blue butterfly that sings the blues on a warm lazy day somewhere outside.

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<sup>30</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> See above, pp. 123, 170. For further details of Harman’s argument on metaphor and “allure,” see Harman, “Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities,” 137–138; and Harman, *L’Objet Quadruple*, 117–118.

## ***Blue's Strange Encounters***

Following on from that argument, it is possible to argue that *Blue* is, first and foremost, a film about witnessing or, in other words, a film about the ways in which all bodies encounter one another. By reflecting on his condition of witness to the slow demise of his own body and to the virus shutting down his immune system, while simultaneously trying to come to terms with the increasing CMV-induced blindness that was affecting his ability to witness anything, Jarman created a film that goes well beyond literalist readings of its structure such as the one proposed by Tim Lawrence.<sup>32</sup> In its attempt to highlight the strangeness of AIDS, *Blue*, itself, became an *über*-metaphor able to point to the theatrical conditions under which bodies, human and nonhuman, encounter one another. As a result, *Blue* ought to be divided into four different sections, one for each of the four main strange encounters explored within the film. Those are: the encounter between Derek Jarman and 1) International Klein Blue; 2) the fictional boy named Blue; 3) AIDS; and, finally, 4) the encounter between the film's audience and AIDS-cum-*Blue*.

### Jarman versus International Klein Blue

Derek Jarman's fascination with ultramarine blue was the result of the influence Yves Klein had had on the British artist. According to Tony Peake, the first sketches of *Blue* can be traced back as far as 1986, when Jarman wrote down the first ideas for the film, then named *Bliss*, on the pages of one of his journals.<sup>33</sup> However, it was not until the following year that a clear reference to Yves Klein appeared in his journals in reference to the film, by then renamed *International Blue*:

[A] fictional film exploring the world of the painter Yves Klein, inventor of the void, International Blue, the symphony monotone. A film without compunction or narrative existing only for an idea. In the cacophony of voices Yves found the silence of the immaterial, expressed in a series of

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<sup>32</sup> On Tim Lawrence's division of the film into three literal parts, see above, pp. 181–182.

<sup>33</sup> Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 362.

symbolic gestures performed in six short working years before his early death at 32.<sup>34</sup>

Yves Klein's famous ultramarine monochromes were created by Klein as a way of liberating colour from the "prison" of line, contour, and form, and to present it as a vehicle of contemplation of what he called "the Immaterial."<sup>35</sup> However, by showing his monochromes on stanchions placed approximately 20 cm away from the walls, and by extending the colour from the front of the canvas all the way around the edges of the panels, Klein managed not only to create an experience of colour as a kind of immaterial vibration but also to present that immateriality in tension with the materiality of the pigment.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, according to Kaira Cabañas, Klein did end up "[privileging] color's 'immaterial' status and effects as a way to work against an empiricism that believes too much in the objectivity of visual perception."<sup>37</sup>

Established readings of Klein such as the one above have led most theorists to understand Jarman's choice of ultramarine screen as a rejection or negation of representation, a reading that is somehow supported by both Klein's and Jarman's idea that blue was the most efficient colour in providing an experience of void and nothingness, possibly due to its association with the perceived infinity of the sky.<sup>38</sup> As Tim Lawrence wrote, "[inspired] by Klein, *Blue* is a refusal of representation. Unwilling to reduce people with AIDS to a fixed category, the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>35</sup> See Yves Klein, "The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial," in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 818–820.

<sup>36</sup> See Kaira Cabañas, "Yves Klein's Performative Realism," *Grey Room* 31 (2008): 9–10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> As Klein wrote:

"In the realm of the blue air more than anywhere else one feels that the world is accessible to the most unlimited reverie. It is then that a reverie assumes true depth. The blue sky yawns beneath the dreams, the dream escapes from the two-dimensional image; soon in a paradoxical way the airborne dream exists only in depth, while the two other dimensions, in which picturesque and painted reverie are entertained, lose all visionary interest. The world is thus on the far side of an unsilvered mirror, there is an imaginary beyond, a beyond pure and insubstantial, and that is the dwelling place of [Gaston] Bachelard's beautiful phrase: 'First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness, then a profundity of blue.'" Klein, "The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial," 819.

For the way Jarman read Klein's blue and his own, see Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 82; also, Wollen, *Blue*, 125.

monochrome screen dramatically reveals the artificiality of art.”<sup>39</sup> Or, as one hears in *Blue*:

To be an astronaut of the void, leave the comfortable house that imprisons you with reassurance. Remember,  
To be going and to have are not eternal – fight the fear that engenders the beginning, the middle and the end.

For *Blue* there are no boundaries or solutions.<sup>40</sup>

However, monochromes should not be understood as a literal rejection of representation. As Jim Ellis has shown, neither Klein nor Jarman have taken the monochrome literally as a rejection of representation. Rather, they have used it as a particular kind of representation, one that abandons certainty to become a “throbbing site of possibility.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, instead of trying to represent AIDS in a realistic manner and being doomed to fail, what Jarman did with his choice of an International Klein Blue screen was create a metaphor that evoked AIDS while simultaneously stressing its ungraspability. In *Blue*’s own terms:

Over the mountains is the shrine to Rita, where all at the end of the line call. Rita is the Saint of the Lost Cause. The saint of all who are at their wit’s end, who are hedged in and trapped by the facts of the world. These facts, detached from cause, trapped the Blue Eyes Boy in a system of unreality. Would all these blurred facts that deceive dissolve in his last breath? For accustomed to believing in image, an absolute idea of value, his world had forgotten the command of essence: Thou Shall Not Create Unto Thyself Any Graven Image, although you know the task is to fill the empty page. From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image.

Time is what keeps the light from reaching us.

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence, “AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman’s *Blue*,” 252.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 16–17.

<sup>41</sup> See Ellis, *Derek Jarman’s Angelic Conversations*, 237.

The image is a prison of the soul, your heredity, your education, your vices and aspirations, your qualities, your psychological world.

I have walked behind the sky.

For what are you seeking?

The fathomless blue of Bliss.<sup>42</sup>

Jarman knew that a direct portrayal of AIDS would be out of reach as is, indeed, a direct grasp of any body. By choosing International Klein Blue as a metaphor for the blindness involved in all encounters, Jarman created a metareality and forced the film's audience to become aware of the performed nature of all perceptions. Furthermore, in *Blue*, metaphor allowed for the fathomless qualities of International Klein Blue and its association with the void to be separated from the colour itself and become attached to AIDS, which was then revealed as ungraspable stranger.

### Jarman versus Blue

The second encounter explored in *Blue* is the one between Jarman and the fictional boy named Blue:

Blue fights diseased Yellowbelly whose fetid breath scorches the trees yellow with ague. Betrayal is the oxygen of his devilry. He'll stab you in the back. Yellowbelly places a jaundiced kiss in the air, the stink of pubs blinds Blue's eyes. Evil swims in the yellow bile. Yellowbelly's snake eyes poison. He crawls over Eve's rotting apple wasp-like. Quick as a flash he sting Blue in the mouth – "AAAUGH!" – his hellish legion buzz and chuckle in the mustard gas. They'll piss all over you. Sharp nicotine-stained fangs bared. Blue transformed into an insectocutor, his Blue aura frying the foes.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Blue appears in the film as a metaphor for Jarman himself, as his own alter-ego or *persona*. By evoking the Blue Eyed Boy, Jarman tried to evoke that part of his body that transcends his own knowledge of his own reality. Blue was the artist's attempt to unveil and make public the *theatron* separating him from himself, and, therefore, the distance at which even the closest of encounters take place. That strangest of separations is evident in Jarman's use of the possessive determiner 'our' to denote both separation and unity when addressing Blue in the final verses of the film's poem:

No one will remember our work  
 Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud  
 And be scattered like  
 Mist that is chased by the  
 Rays of the sun  
 For our time is the passing of a shadow  
 And our lives will run like  
 Sparks through the stubble.

I place a delphinium, Blue, upon your grave.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, the metaphor of the boy named Blue, was used by Jarman to foreground the distance separating him from the reality of his "zero-person," Harman's chosen term to designate that part of a body that is always removed even from its knowledge of itself. In Harman's words,

[it] refers to the 'essence' or intrinsic nature of an entity apart from any access we might have to it. The problem shared by first- and third-person descriptions is obvious: namely, both are *descriptions*. Against any ontology in which things are reducible to a listing of attributes, I hold that the being of things is never commensurate with descriptions of any sort.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the usage of first- and third-person descriptions will never deliver the full reality of a body even if, in the case of a first-person statement, the removed

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>45</sup> Harman, "Zero-Person and the Psyche," 253–254.

body is also the author of the claims made about itself. Thus, and in line with the argument of Chapter Two, zero-persons are unreachable, ungraspable, and can only make themselves known through role-playing, like when people speak “as a scholar,” “as a man,” “as a woman,” “as a victor,” “as a republican,” “as a queer,” “as a Blue Eyed Boy,” in order to be understood.

The boy named Blue is Jarman’s metaphor for his own withdrawn reality, a metaphor that is revelatory of the gap existing between the artist and his knowledge of himself. With Blue, Jarman has set himself in action as the blue-eyed hero of a series of battles against Yellow, Jarman’s metaphor for the enemy within, for disease, danger, and death:

The executioner in Spain was dressed and painted in yellow. / For every yellow Primrose that commemorates Disraeli there is a Yellow Star. These are the stars extinguished in the gas chamber. (Old as the ghetto.) Jews were wearing yellow hats in the Middle Ages. They were condemned to yellow like thieves and robbers who were coloured yellow and taken to the gallows.<sup>46</sup>

### Jarman versus AIDS

There is a third encounter that is played out in *Blue*, the encounter between Jarman’s own body and the virus living within it. That encounter is mostly explored through the telling of the various medical procedures Jarman underwent in order to slow down the progression of his CMV-induced blindness, as well as through the artist’s account of the physical symptoms and side-effects of medication he experienced. In a truly exceptional passage, Jarman is voiced by one of the actors who spends two-and-a-half minutes reading the full list of potential side-effects of DHPG, a drug Jarman had been taking intravenously twice a day:

The side effects of DHPG, the drug for which I have to come into hospital to be dripped twice a day are: Low white blood cell count, increased risk of infection, low platelet count which may increase the

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<sup>46</sup> Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Color* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1995), 91.

risk of bleeding, low red blood cell count (anaemia), fever, rash, abnormal liver function, chills, swelling of the body (oedema), infections, malaise, irregular heart beat, high blood pressure (hypertension), low blood pressure (hypotension), abnormal thoughts or dreams, loss of balance (ataxia), coma, confusion, dizziness, headache, nervousness, damage to nerves (paraesthesia), psychosis, sleepiness (somnolence), shaking, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite (anorexia), diarrhoea, bleeding from the stomach or intestine (intestinal haemorrhage), abdominal pain, increased number of one type of white blood cell, low blood sugar, shortness of breath, hair loss (alopecia), itching (pruritus), hives, blood in the urine, abnormal kidney functions, increased blood urea, redness (inflammation), pain or irritation (phlebitis).

Retinal detachments have been observed in patients both before and after initiation of therapy. The drug has caused decreased sperm production in animals and may cause infertility in humans, and birth defects in animals. Although there is no information in human studies, it should be considered a potential carcinogen since it causes tumours in animals.

If you are concerned about any of the above side-effects or if you would like any further information, please ask your doctor.<sup>47</sup>

Jarman's thorough listing of all the 48 side-effects resembles what has come to be known in Philosophy as 'Latour litanies,' lists of apparently unrelated items that are frequently used as rhetorical devices in the work of Bruno Latour. Of those 'litanies' Ian Bogost said they are an example of an "ontography:"

Let's adopt *ontography* as a name for a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity. From the perspective of metaphysics, ontography involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind. Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a

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<sup>47</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 18–19.

compendium, a record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interaction through collocation.<sup>48</sup>

By having a list of all the side-effects of DHPG read against a soundtrack made of hospital and synthesised sounds, Jarman was able to convey the breadth of a reality that exceeds the sum of its appearances. With such a gesture, closer in effect to a multiplication than to an addition, the artist managed to evoke the unfamiliarity of the daily battles taking place inside his tired dying body, the foreignness of a reality impossible to be fully portrayed by—say—documentary images or ‘objective’ verbal descriptions. Granted, having the side-effects of DHPG listed and slowly read did not succeed in what the other approaches to representation have failed, namely in providing a clear and unobstructed pathway towards the full reality of AIDS. However, as a technique used for highlighting the strangeness within the familiar, it did succeed in foregrounding the alien reality of AIDS, a reality that refuses to be fully grasped even by the host from whom it borrows its life.

### Public versus AIDS

Finally, the fourth encounter that is staged by or within *Blue* is the encounter between its audience and the global AIDS epidemic. Jarman, like it was already seen, had often stressed his disappointment with the ways in which AIDS was normally portrayed in the media, as well as his desire to present an alternative to those highly problematic mass-circulated images of people dying with AIDS. As Tom Peake noted in his biography of the artist, “[there] was a great deal in society’s reaction to sexuality, and to AIDS, which he [Derek Jarman] passionately believed needed addressing and altering.”<sup>49</sup> In order to do so, Jarman had to make the film’s audience become aware of the active role they play in their own encounter with the pandemic; he had to make them aware that AIDS is as much about HIV and those infected as it is about people themselves. After all, AIDS was not, in the early 1990s, simply a condition that affected isolated individuals; it was also a public reality and, as such, every single

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<sup>48</sup> Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 461.

member of society had a duty of responsibility over the future of the pandemic, both medically—by, for instance, voicing the need for more research funding—and socially—by demanding free access to medication on a global scale, by fighting for the end of stigma and discrimination, etc.

While reminding his audience of their co-implication in AIDS, Jarman also needed to make the members of the public aware of their own blindness to the full breadth of the pandemic, to its ultimate strangeness, and, as a consequence, highlight the contingency of any knowledge they might have had of it. In order to do so, Jarman had to trigger in his audience a feeling of what Roger Hallas called “corporeal implication.”<sup>50</sup> That was achieved through the use of the International Klein Blur screen as well as through the voices of three different actors and of Jarman himself, who all read what could otherwise be read by a single person. Thanks to those devices, Jarman managed to free his diegetic voice from any visual or aural referents including himself and, through that, allow it to rub against the bodies of his audience and to implicate them as witnesses in a strange encounter:

I fill this room with the echo of many voices  
 Who passed time here  
 Voices unlocked from the blue of the long dried paint  
 The sun comes and floods this empty room  
 I call it my room  
 My room has welcomed many summers  
 Embraced laughter and tears  
 Can it fill itself with your laughter  
 Each word a sunbeam  
 Glancing in the light  
 This is the song of My Room

Blue stretches, yawns and is awake.<sup>51</sup>

This chapter has shown how Derek Jarman’s *Blue* ought to be seen as a giant metaphor, one in which, through performative sounds, text, and flickering

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<sup>50</sup> See Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, pp. 225–230.

<sup>51</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue: Text of a Film*, 10.

ultramarine screen, the audience is made aware of the strangeness of all encounters with the ungraspable body of AIDS. However, through its portrayal of Jarman's encounter with International Klein Blue and with his own withdrawn body, through depicting the relation between his body and the virus progressively killing it, and through staging society's implication in the present and future of AIDS, *Blue* went beyond AIDS and became a metaphysical meditation on the strangeness of all bodies, human and nonhuman, and on the ways in which metaphor is able to highlight the *theatron* of all encounters. In short, *Blue* became metareality.

In the film, the colour blue operated as a metaphor for blindness, the kind of blindness that not only makes it impossible for a body to ever fully grasp another, but also, paradoxically, the kind of blindness that constitutes an opening-up of a new kind of expanded vision, of new modes of encountering—of new epistemologies—throbbing with possibility after having embraced noise and contingency and freed themselves from expectations of mastery and absolute clarity. Through its use of text, sound and flickering ultramarine screen, the real for which the film stood was evoked in its interior transcendence as a whisper heard from the depths of the real, as a strange voice that is present and yet impossible to be pinned down, anchored, or located. In short, and in line with Derek Jarman's intentions, *Blue* as the blindness that sees.

## —FIVE—

**Blind Dates: The Ecopolitics of Facing Strangers**

*The face is present in its refusal to be contained.*  
—Emmanuel Lévinas<sup>1</sup>

**Urgencies**

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, a general theory of performance performance was proposed, one in which performance was understood primarily as the contingent translation of bodies, human and nonhuman, into roles, functions, or *personae* every time they encounter one another. After that, and via a reflection on the evocative power of metaphor, a case has been made in support of performative writing as an epistemological tool that, when embraced and pushed to its tipping point, can both highlight and interrupt the smooth running of the performative apparatus of all encounters, and to bring forth bodies as ungraspable strangers. Following on from that, it is now time to let the political consequences of both theses unfold in order to reveal how such an understanding of performance as the stuff of all encounters can bring about a new ecopolitics that is able to respond in a more efficient manner to, amongst others, the age of global warming, the rhetorics of ‘terrorism’ and ‘radicalisation,’ the exhaustion of food resources, and—yet again—the rise of nationalist and fascist political agendas in Europe. In the claustrophobic times of the Anthropocene, when the dark clouds above appear to permanently stand for imminent annihilation and paradoxically ground the development of increasingly myopic political views which, in turn, do nothing more than feeding existential

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

anxieties and speeding up the arrival of certain doom, what does performance stand for? In this moment, right now, when the world seems to be holding itself by a very fine thread to 'T minus 1,' what kind of change can be brought about by an ecological expansion of performance beyond the persistent encounters with the human that make up 'Culture'? Can the general theory of performance proposed in this dissertation contribute to the filling of the theoretical potholes left open by the narcissistic fascination with the human as the sole architect of the world?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter will depart from one of the first and, arguably, most important scholarly works to have tackled the relationship between performance and politics, a book that stands out amongst all others and that cannot be avoided due to both the timeliness of its argument and the way in which it has become deeply inscribed in the theoretical apparatus of Performance Studies. That book is, as it was already pointed out in Chapter Two, Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*, one of the most cited works whenever scholars have tried to relate performance as something of the stage and of the gallery with performance as the way in which one appears in, and makes sense of, the world. After analysing the main political argument found in *Unmarked*, this chapter will then trouble the kind of queer politics of which Phelan's work is representative. In order to do so, two notions will be measured against one another, the notions of 'policing' and 'politics' as they have appeared in the work of Jacques Rancière but also as they echo Michel Foucault's work on governmentality and Deleuze and Guattari's political theory. Following on from that, a new queer politics of performance will come to the fore, one that is no longer property of humans but that is shared by bodies as diverse as hammers, orchids, wasps, and works of 'art.' Through the openness to the strangeness of bodies that such a politics entails, a different understanding of community will emerge, a community that is no longer based on shared qualities, but is, instead, a community of strangers, human and nonhuman, in line with an ecological reading of the work of Roberto Esposito and Emmanuel Lévinas.

## Ephemeral Reproductions

In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan made a case against the politics of representation and, in particular, against the role played by economies of representation and circulation of representations in the sociocultural actualisation of sexual difference. Drawing, as it has already been seen in previous chapters, from feminist theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the author eventually concluded that the mass reproduction and circulation of representations of femininity not only failed to capture the reality of female subjectivities but also, and perhaps most importantly, that it led to a shutting down of the space of emancipatory politics. According to her argument, the problem with representation, with having images standing in for the real, is that, as an attempt to survey that which is there, images will always be partially phantasmatic, inauthentic, unable to correspond, point by point, to the real they claim to represent.

Representation, Phelan wrote, “always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, *Unmarked* emerged as an attempt to “[examine] the implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power” and thus expose “the blind spot within [that] theoretical frame.”<sup>3</sup>

Even today, twenty years after *Unmarked* was published for the first time, the party political consensus still equates visibility with political power and that is nowhere more evident than in LGBT politics. True, visibility politics have allowed LGBT citizens not only to find each other, organise themselves, and demand State action against discrimination, but also to show themselves as a critical mass, one that must be taken into account when trying to recruit voting intentions during electoral campaigns. As such, one could be easily led to argue, along with many, that representation and visibility are the way forward towards emancipation, i.e. the most efficient weapons in the fight for the right to be recognised in, and to speak from, one’s difference.

However, according to Phelan’s argument, that is not the case. Representation, through its dialectics of Self and Other, always implies the sacrifice of part of

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<sup>2</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

what is represented, something to which Adorno had already drawn attention in *Negative Dialectics*:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. [...] It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.<sup>4</sup>

In order for a politics of visibility to exist, individuals will necessarily have to let go of part of themselves, a part that cannot be included in the representational image operating, as it does, through what could be called a politics of the lowest common denominator. But furthermore: when entering the realm of visibility through being framed by a representation or an identity—when being classified—minority bodies will always have their image arrested and fixed in society’s attempt at re-establishing a norm, at reaching a new homeostasis, a new State, a state of the new ‘normal.’<sup>5</sup> In that economy of representations, like in any other dialectic, what starts by being identified as Other is eventually subsumed as the Same for the sake of the survival of the social system and reduction of its levels of entropy. Like cold water that is mixed with hot water and becomes indifferentiable warm water, in the politics of representation what starts as an increasingly visible Other tends to end up being turned into more of the Same. Like the child who, during the Lacanian mirror stage, finds its identity through discovering its resemblance with the image of the other, the ultimate end in a politics of representation and visibility is not the safeguarding of a right to differ but, rather, the expansion of an homogenised space of the Same. To go back to the case of LGBT politics, what started as “we’re here, we’re queer!” turned into “we’re here, and we’re just like everybody else!”

However, in performance, Phelan found a different kind of politics, one that was able to provide an alternative to the subsumption of the Other in the Same that marks the politics of images and their reproduction:

Performance, insofar as it can be defined as representation without reproduction, can be seen as a model for another representational

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Phelan, *Unmarked*, 2.

economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other *as the Same* is not assured.<sup>6</sup>

For Phelan, and unlike other art forms such as photography, painting, or even theatre, performance enables audiences to encounter bodies whilst avoiding being caught in economies of reproduction, thanks to its necessarily contingent and ephemeral nature:

Performance is the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance. Poised forever at the threshold of the present, performance enacts the productive appeal of the nonreproductive.<sup>7</sup>

However, as it was already seen, and notwithstanding its contingency in time and space, performance still only produces images that cannot exhaust the reality of the bodies for which they stand. Regardless of how close to the body of the performer an audience member might be, regardless of how real the performer's actions on stage might be, regardless of there being a script being followed or not, still the audience will never be able to access the full being of the performer.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, and as Philip Auslander demonstrated, performance and performance documentation exist in what can be seen as an ecological co-dependency, i.e. one does not exist without the other. It is documentation, the reproduced and reproducible image of a performance, that, by serving as

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>8</sup> For the full exposition of this claim, see above, pp. 104–114.

evidence that the performance has indeed taken place, performatively and retroactively confers the status of performance to the performance itself.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, there is another sense in which the opposition between performance and reproducible images cannot be taken all the way through: even if a painting can be seen several times or reproduced in a book, magazine, or tablet screen; even if a play is always the reenactment of the dramatic text that precedes it; even if a photograph owes its existence to the technological developments that made possible the mechanical reproduction of images; even if all that is true, the precise conditions of an encounter with a painting, a play, or a photograph can never be fully reproduced or reenacted—they, too, are contingent.

As an example, every time one faces a painting, whether in a gallery or in a book, an encounter takes place, one that is often the result of an unknown number of vectors of causation converging in a particular instance of space-time: mood and memories intersect wall and catalogue texts, eyes encounter someone else's gaze, the certainties of previous knowledge are challenged by different arrangements of light in the room (or the lack thereof). In short, all encounters are irreproducible, all encounters have a duration, all encounters disappear into memory and memories sometimes come in USB drives.

Even if the same painting is encountered again and again, in an art book or hanging on a different gallery wall; even if the play is seen again on a different stage, performed by a different company, directed by a different director, illuminated by different lights, played on a different set; or even if the play, the stage, the company, the director, the light, and the set are the same and only one's memory of it is new because that show has already been seen before, still every new encounter, every new reiteration of the same body, will be a different one. For that reason, no body is ever experienced without glitches or contingent

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<sup>9</sup> See Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation." One example of the places in which the dynamic co-dependency of performance and performance documentation is most evident in contemporary culture is the social networking site Facebook. On Facebook one is able to broadcast to the world that an event has taken place. Be it a wedding (one's own or a friend's), a night out, a music gig, an unexpected flash mob, a demonstration, or a piece of club performance, events are proven to have existed and officially ascribed their ephemerality through the medium of status updates, check-ins, and photo uploads. It could even be possible to argue, half-jokingly that "if it isn't on Facebook, it did not take place!" Facebook, as the archive of one's life, is also the place where the events in which one has taken part are retroactively re-cognised as ephemeral, transient, contingent, relational —"if you've missed it, here's the pictures."

contaminations—without noise. Or, better still, every encounter with a body, be it artistic or not, is always an encounter with either something new or with something old that is being performed, translated, brought-forth anew. In other words, if, as it has been claimed in Chapter Two, no body can ever fully encounter another, and if, therefore, all encounters are encounters with contingent *personae*, then the chances of them being repeated or reproduced point by point is, to say the least, extremely low. In conclusion, it is because encounters are always mediated by a body-image that stands for a body-in-itself, that they are always necessarily reenactments and re-presentations, albeit always, as Phelan claimed, also ephemeral ones. And neither is painting, sculpture, photography or theatre, nor performance art, able to avoid that.

What, then, does that entail for politics? If all encounters are simultaneously reproducible and ephemeral; if all body-images are always simultaneously copies and originals in the sense that, as copies, they stand for an always distant body and, as originals, they are unable to take place in the exact same way the next time around; if that is the case, what kind of politics is brought forth by the realisation of that fact?

### **Queer, All Too Human**

As it was seen in Chapter One, the Humanities were, in the late twentieth-century, dominated by the critical attitude that had, since Kant, been progressively enveloping humans in their own self-reflections. From Foucault's work on the power-knowledge dyad to Derrida's deconstruction of phallogocentrism, Continental Philosophy made a name for itself through critiquing hegemonic discourses in order to reveal the inescapable political situatedness of all knowledge. That is nowhere more evident than in the work of Queer Theory, marked as it is by a desire to unveil how supposedly neutral discourses on 'facts' are, in fact, the product of existing ideologies embedded in language itself, and responsible for retroactively constructing that about which they speak. As Judith Butler wrote:

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as prior. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the

very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence of that awareness of the power that discourse and representations have on bodies, Queer Theory has, since the early 1990s, concerned itself with deconstructing discourse in order to highlight what in it is implied but, nonetheless, left unsaid, i.e. its ideological foundations. As Noreen Giffney noted, influenced by Psychoanalysis, Poststructuralism, and Literary Theory,

[queer] theorists seek out the ways in which texts are constructed by interrogating and denaturalising the text's manifold assumptions, and exposing the text's internal contradictions and reliance upon excluded properties to evoke a sense of unity. What is not said—slips, silences and unfinished thoughts—garner as much interest as that which is verbalised; unpicking the latent content becomes as important a task as understanding that which is stated directly.<sup>11</sup>

However, and as it was highlighted in Chapter One, the problem with many works of Queer Theory is, in the context of this dissertation and the ecological crisis that triggered it, not only that they tend to place discourse before reality, but also that, in doing so, they are not ecological enough. In other words, in restricting their thought to the world-making power of (human) language, most queer theorists have contributed to the maintenance of the divide between nonhuman 'Nature' as that which is given and human 'Culture' as that which is constructed. As Rosi Braidotti has recently claimed:

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Noreen Giffney, "Introduction: The 'q' Word," in *The Ashgate Companion to Queer Theory*, eds. Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 7.

The distinction [between 'Nature' and 'Culture'] allows for a sharper focus in social analysis and it provides robust foundations to study and critique the social mechanisms that support the construction of key identities, institutions, and practices. In progressive politics, social constructivist methods sustain the efforts to de-naturalize social differences and thus show their man-made and historically contingent structure. [...] This insight into the socially bound and therefore historically variable nature of social inequalities paves the road to their resolution by human intervention through social policy and activism.<sup>12</sup>

The result of such an inability or unwillingness to think beyond the human is that, today, dominant paradigms in Queer Theory leave the field unable to respond to pressing issues beyond the construction of human identities, issues such as global warming or the spread of deadly viral epidemics and remains, therefore, more interested in that which is ultimately the same, i.e. the human, than in what is ultimately queer, the nonhuman. As a result, in that impasse, while Queer Theory remains silent or thinks about how to speak, an ecological crisis has started and extinction is the only certain human future.

Granted, critique is important at a time when discourse still leads to segregation, oppression, and even death. But how can it account for the increasing entanglement of nonhuman beings and human lives? What happens to the subaltern when Twitter allows her to speak? Will deconstruction of authority in language ever prevent the glaciers of Greenland from melting? Is it enough to think the 2011 London riots from the point of view of class and/or race oppression? What about the role apparently played by Blackberry devices in the lead up to and during the events? Is a punch enough to break a window or does the window also need to be made of glass? If the glass window is replaced by a concrete wall, will that punch (or that stone that is thrown) still be enough to break it?

In a complex world of relations, where encounters are performative and contingent on the bodies of performers and audiences, agency and causation are never a matter of a single human individual deciding how to act and therefore being fully accountable for the consequences of his or her act. In a

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<sup>12</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 2–3.

world of social media, mobile telecommunications, cyber warfare, and impending environmental catastrophe, no event can ever be fully explained by simply positing human agents as their direct and sole cause, neither when throwing stones nor when carrying explosive vests nor when using language or allocating identities. Not only do trees often fall without the intervention of lumberjacks but also, being the lumberjack present, he or she cannot normally do much without the intervention of an axe or a saw.

Therefore, Queer Theory, as radical as it might be, still privileges the human as the primary site of politics. As Jeffrey Cohen beautifully and concisely put it in his book *Medieval Identity Machines*:

Queer theory is undoubtedly the most radical challenge yet posed to the immutability of sexual identities, but it seems strange that a critical movement predicated upon the smashing of boundary should limit itself to the small contours of human form, as if the whole of the body could be contained within the porous embrace of its skin.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the problem is that, by restricting itself to the realm of the human and to the ways human identity is retroactively constructed or enacted through discourse, dominant strands of queer thought end up maintaining the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide, whereby 'Culture' is that which, as a text, can always be deconstructed, and 'Nature' that which, although existent like the flesh of human bodies, is always either safely out of reach or impossible to be grasped outside its relationship with human language. By wanting to denaturalise the human and simultaneously neglect the realm of the nonhuman, Queer Theory, in its fight against essentialism and human 'nature,' has paradoxically contributed to the reaffirmation of the divide upon which the human is dependent.

Given the above, how can queer, understood both as a theory and a politics of irreconcilable difference, tackle the nonhuman under the light of the global ecological crisis? If, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of [identity] aren't made (or

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 40.

*can't be made*) to signify monolithically,” how can it dare to venture beyond human identity into the realm of those bodies with which humans share responsibility for the world?<sup>14</sup> In order to think such an expansion of queer into the political existence of both human and nonhuman bodies alike, as well as its relation to the ecological theory of performance put forward in this dissertation, it is important to, first, understand what politics means. That shall now be done by departing from the notions of ‘policing’ and ‘politics’ as they have appeared in the work of Jacques Rancière.

## **Policing**

In *Disagreement*, Rancière proposed an understanding of ‘police’ and ‘policing’ that is extremely useful in the context of the task being undertaken here. In everyday discourse as it is heard on the streets and broadcast through the ether to radios and TV screens, ‘the police’ usually means the law enforcement institution and its employees, the officers that are responsible for fighting crime and maintaining order in our cities, be it the London Metropolitan Police, the New York Police Department, or the *Berliner Polizei*. Rancière, however, used ‘the police’ to name a completely different reality. For him, ‘policing’ is closer to what happens indoors in Whitehall, Strasbourg, or Washington, D.C. and not so much what happens out on the streets often involving truncheons, horses, fire or taser guns, helmets, water cannons, and men in uniforms. ‘Policing,’ for Rancière, has to do with creating and administrating a particular social order and cannot be reduced to a specific law-enforcement agency of the State apparatus. In other words, ‘policing’ is closer to the everyday meaning of ‘politics:’

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 28.

In enacting such renaming, Rancière wanted to highlight the fact that “[the] petty police is just a particular form of a more general order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community,” i.e. a particular form of what Michel Foucault named ‘governmentality.’<sup>16</sup> Foucault was, as Rancière has acknowledged on several occasions, the only late twentieth-century philosopher to have significantly influenced him, the notion of ‘police’ being one he borrowed from Foucault’s writings on the specific type of rationality at work in the exercise of State power.<sup>17</sup>

In “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” his Tanner lectures delivered at Stanford University in 1979, Foucault investigated the relationship between mechanisms of rationalisation and State power by looking at two sets of doctrines: the *raison d’état* and the police. From the Enlightenment onwards, according to Foucault, *raison d’état* had been a principle of rational State government that sought to reinforce and sustain not the arbitrary powers of God or of the sovereign but, rather, the strength and survival of the State itself.<sup>18</sup> It was in that context of rationalised State power that ‘the police’ eventually appeared, in works by writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the name for the broad set of practices responsible for regulating the lives of citizens and guaranteeing their happiness, therefore securing a thriving State. Drawing from *Elements of Police* by eighteenth-century German political theorist Johann von Justi, Foucault highlighted the dual nature of the early modern notion of ‘police:’

The police, [von Justi] says, is what enables the state to increase its power and exert its strength to the full. On the other hand, the police has to keep the citizens happy—happiness being understood as survival, life, and improved living. He perfectly defines what I feel to be the aim of the modern art of government, or state rationality, namely, to develop those

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> For Rancière’s acknowledgement of Foucault’s influence on his own work, see, for instance, Jacques Rancière, “Against an Ebbing Tide,” in *Reading Rancière*, eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 246–247; also, Jacques Rancière, “Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement,” *SubStance* 29, no. 2 (2000), 13.

<sup>18</sup> See Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 314–317.

elements constitutive of individuals' lives in such a way that their development also fosters the strength of the state.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in Foucault's reading of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political thought, 'the police' is not a mere law-enforcement agency operating within and on behalf of the State but, rather, a technology of government that is particular to the rational principle upon which modern States were being built: 'policing' was the name of all mechanisms responsible for guaranteeing the survival of the State through the management of the happiness and lives of its population. 'The police' was not understood as an institution in line with contemporary understandings of the work of the role played by security forces, but, instead, a way of governing through knowing, a *Polizeiwissenschaft*, "at once an art of government and a method for the analysis of a population living on a territory."<sup>20</sup> In that sense, and as Rancière noted when discussing Foucault's usage of the term:

It is the weakness and not the strength of this [police] order in certain states that inflates the petty police to the point of putting it in charge of the whole set of police functions. The evolution of Western societies reveals *a contrario* that the policeman is one element in a social mechanism linking medicine, welfare, and culture.<sup>21</sup>

Still, unlike Foucault, Rancière did not reduce the police to the State and its technologies of government. In his words:

I do not, however, identify the police with what is termed the 'state apparatus.' The notion of a state apparatus is in fact bound up with the presupposition of an opposition between State and society in which the state is portrayed as a machine, a "cold monster" imposing its rigid order on the life of society. [...] The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations as from the rigidity of state functions. *The police is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it. [...]*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.<sup>22</sup>

Policing, for Rancière, has first and foremost to do with aesthetics, with all the processes that make something visible within a system and not merely a way of governing aimed at increasing the strength of a particular State apparatus through administrating the lives and managing the happiness of its citizens. In his view, the police is irreducible to the State. The police is an order of the visible, an arrangement of bodies and of the roles they are expected to play, not merely another name for the rational government of existing populations by State institutions. As Samuel Chambers noted, Rancière's concept of 'police' is intimately connected to his broader concept of 'distribution of the sensible' (*partage du sensible*). That is because, in French, "*partage*" means both 'dividing' (the world) and 'sharing' (it). Division of the world in sensible parts is what allows for participation for it is only through division that bodies become visible as parts of a system and, as such, are given a voice of their own. In Chambers' words, "[*le partage du sensible* determines a certain sort of intelligibility, of what 'is' because it is made legible by the *partage*."<sup>23</sup> Policing, in Rancière, does not so much manage preexisting populations as it creates populations as such.

Furthermore, in turning the social into an aggregate of intelligible parts, policing excludes the possibility of any supplement to its order, it denies the possibility of noise, of parts that are not accounted for. In other words, "[the] police order distributes bodies without a remainder and without exclusion (*à l'exclusion de tout supplément*); there is nothing it does not account for, nothing left over or external to its process of counting."<sup>24</sup> As such, Rancière's 'policing' is a way of counting that is *implicit in the social order it actualises whilst exhausting that*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 29 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 70.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 43.

*same order through positive discrimination of its constituent bodies.* Because the bodies that belong to a certain order are only those that are able to be counted as part of it, rather than an oppressive force the police is all about consensus; it is an order of agreeable bodies both in the sense of bodies that are pleasurable and of bodies that say ‘yes’ for only consensus and pleasure guarantee the maintenance of an order with negligible disturbances. For that same reason, Rancière’s police order is not, therefore, reducible to the State apparatus or understood in terms of Foucauldian relations of power. Whilst, in Foucault, ‘policing’ was the name given to a variety of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century practices that, through governing the lives of citizens, guaranteed the survival of an existing State apparatus, in Rancière ‘the police’ does not come after a certain order in order to maintain it. Instead of a form of power that enforces an *a priori* order, ‘the police’ is, in Rancière, an order in itself, a configuration of the visible. As Chambers wrote, “[in] Rancière’s untimely account, there can be no clear-cut difference between the distribution and its enforcement.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, and as it will be seen in more detail below, whilst Foucault’s ‘police,’ as a form of governmentality, had to do with power, ‘power’ is a concept that has no place in Rancière’s political thought.<sup>26</sup>

Still, despite their differences, both Rancière’s and Foucault’s usage of the term ‘police’ have crucial features in common: in both authors, policing has to do with an ordering of the social, with distributing bodies in space and time. Policing is, in both views, what happens when information is differentiated from noise during an encounter between bodies in which a body becomes tangible and recognisable as something. Policing is simultaneously a process of selection, of recognition, and of administration of bodies *qua* parts of a social system, an ordering that is then responsible for guiding the ways in which bodies will encounter one another and read each other in future encounters, all in the name of keeping the levels of entropy of the system to a minimum. In short,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> For more on Rancière’s disagreement with Foucault’s work on “power” see below, pp. 215–217.

policing is what guarantees the survival of a certain social state.<sup>27</sup> In Todd May's words:

Rancière's use of the term police is not exactly the same as Foucault's. It is not concerned solely with practices of governmentality, and it is not embedded in a view of politics that was prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, like Foucault's treatment, Rancière's use of the term keeps alive the idea of the police as involving a social ordering that is enforced not merely by military-style interventions—armed men in uniforms—but more significantly by the idea of a proper social order.<sup>28</sup>

It is finally possible to draw some analogies between policing and the general theory of performance put forward in previous chapters. As it has been argued in Chapter Two, performance is the way in which bodies, understood as autonomous beings are able to encounter one another by being translated into a contingent informational version of themselves, one that is able to be read and interpreted in the phenomenal realm so that it eventually stands as a map or trace of the body itself. That is true at all levels of the real, whether in a body's relation to its environment—understood as the system or set of bodies that surrounds it—or in a body's relation to its parts—understood as the constituent bodies of a given higher-level system. At whichever level of the real, bodies are only able to encounter each other's performances and never other bodies in-themselves. As such, the identity of a body, i.e. its performed *persona*, is not the result of adding up all its body-parts but, rather, a phenomenal pattern that emerges out of the performances of its autonomous parts and that the body is able to perceive as meaningful. Similarly, the social body is made not of individuals but of their recognisable performances, i.e. of the communications that are informationally coherent with the state of the social system.

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<sup>27</sup> The notion of 'state' here is used as synonym for the order of a given social system, like when referring to a 'state of equilibrium' of a thermodynamic system. Previous and future usages of 'the State' (with capital "S"), on the other hand, are meant to designate the set of institutions that govern a national territory.

<sup>28</sup> Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 42.

Following the above, policing is the recursive process whereby a system of bodies is able to produce and maintain itself as an ordered set by filtering and administrating the performances of its parts into lasting recognisable informational patterns. In other words, policing is what allows a body to emerge as a stable and ordered *persona* through selection and recognition of the performances of its body-parts or by differentiating itself from the performances that environ it as its surrounding world. Example: whereas the in-itself of an axe is always more than the sum of its parts and always more than any role it might play in its encounters with its surroundings, its identity as an axe, i.e. the informational pattern or meaningful performance through which it is recognised as such, is contingent on its ability to keep on performing *axeness* at the hands of the lumberjack using it to cut a tree. Policing is, therefore, nothing other than the expectation and administration of that pattern, an expectation and administration that, as Chambers pointed out after reading Rancière, is both the pattern itself and one that does not account for the possibility of something ever falling outside of it.<sup>29</sup> Policing is simultaneously performance to a standard and the enforcement of that standard; it is also, because of that, a denial of misperformance, a rejection of performances that are other than expected. In the police order, visible bodies are bodies that are recognisable and countable as *personae*, bodies whose performances both make up and guarantee the thriving of the order for which they are accountable as parts. By that same token, and unlike those bodies that perform countable *personae*, those that misperform don't play a part in that tangible order and, therefore, play no role in the performance of that system of which the others count as parts.

## Politics

Following on from the above, if 'the police' is to be understood as both a standard of performance and a body's management of that standard through discrimination of information from noise—both internally by administrating the performance of its parts and externally when responding to the performances of its environment—then what does politics stand for?

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<sup>29</sup> See above, p. 211–212.

Going back to Rancière, politics is the challenging of the order of a system, that which, in the argument of this thesis, goes against a body's efforts to maintain the performance standards of its parts. Politics is "whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no part."<sup>30</sup>

In order to understand the idiosyncrasies of Rancière's concept of 'politics,' it is useful to start again from his notion of 'the police' already discussed above and from Foucault's influence on it.

As it has just been seen, 'the police' is, in Rancière's work, both an order of the sensible and the process whereby that order is produced and maintained. Although it departed from Foucault's work on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century governmentality and State rationality, 'the police,' in Rancière, went both beyond the institutions of the State apparatus and the Foucauldian notion of power. For Rancière, 'the police' has nothing to do with power; power is a notion that only prevents politics from taking place. In his words:

What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided. Politics runs up against the police everywhere. We need to think of this encounter as a meeting of the heterogeneous. To be able to do this we have to let go of certain concepts that assert in advance a smooth connection between them. The concept of power is the main such concept.<sup>31</sup>

Rancière is, here, referring directly to Foucault and to his celebrated claim that "[where] there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."<sup>32</sup> The disagreement between the two French thinkers arises from the fact that, whilst for Rancière politics is the radical breaking with the tangible order of the police

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<sup>30</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29–30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95.

and its distribution of the sensible, for Foucault government, as the exercise of power, can only take place provided there is also resistance on the part of those who are governed. Thus, whilst in Rancière politics meets the police as a “meeting of the heterogeneous,” for Foucault one cannot possibly exist without the other. Consequently, to the Foucauldian claim that “everything is political” Rancière replied that “[if] everything is political, then nothing is.”<sup>33</sup>

Because, in Foucault’s late work, resistance is a necessary component of power, one side of the same coin as it were, ‘power’ is a relationship between bodies whereby one body is able to act upon the actions of other bodies only on the condition that the body upon which power is exercised is able to remain free. In other words, bodies can only be governed if they are able to resist and only insofar as they are able to do so. For that reason Foucault’s ‘police’ can only be thought alongside resistance whereas Rancière’s ‘police order’ demands consensus. As Foucault wrote:

The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated. The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an “agonism”—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a *permanent provocation*.<sup>34</sup>

Against the Foucauldian view of power and freedom as the two inseparable sides of the “permanent provocation” responsible for granting everything a political nature, Rancière claimed instead the essence of politics to be an irreconcilable *dissensus* with the police order. If, in Foucault, freedom and resistance were necessary conditions for ‘policing’ to take place as a form of governmentality—in his words, “[power] is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free”—for Rancière the police order is always about

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<sup>33</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, “Afterword: The Subject and Power,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 221–222 (emphasis added).

consensus for only consensual bodies are able to be counted as parts of that order.<sup>35</sup> For that same reason, in Rancière, 'politics' and 'policing' are heterogeneous and irreconcilable realities. In his words:

I [...] proposed to call "politics" the mode of acting that perturbs this [police] arrangement by instituting within its perceptual frames the contradictory theatre of its "appearances." The essence of politics is then dissensus. But dissensus is not the opposition of interests or opinions. It is the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is heterogeneous to it.<sup>36</sup>

Rancière's 'politics' is an agonistic force. As Samuel Chambers pointed out, "[politics] is not; politics disrupts."<sup>37</sup> As disruptive action, politics is never part of the police order as resistance was inherent to power in Foucault. If 'the police' is an order that allows no supplement to it, a way of counting that always presumes to count everything, 'politics' is a "mode of acting" or, in the terms of this thesis, a mode of *performing* that makes supplements possible and that, therefore, calls into question the established police order and the performances it naturalises. "[Politics] is *an act of impurity*" and, as such, it is a mode of performing whereby bodies perform unexpectedly, play previously unseen *personae*, and thus disrupt the existing distribution of the sensible.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, if policing has to do with the management of performance according to a given standard, politics is what happens when noise emerges from behind identifiable informational patterns and bodies suddenly go from recognisable *personae* to foreign actors in a theatre of estrangement. That can happen when one or more recognisable body-parts of a system suddenly start misperforming; or it can also happen when bodies whose performances had been unaccounted for are suddenly able to reveal their presence and demand to be counted. In short, to do politics is to trouble the order of what is visible and taken into account, and what is, instead, filtered out as not belonging. Politics is a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, ed. Andrew Parker, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 226.

<sup>37</sup> Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 40.

misperforming that matters; it is the mattering of misperformance. As Joseph Tanke wrote in relation to the politics of subjectivation in Rancière:

Indeed, for Rancière, it is only through the elaboration of bodies and voices not identified in the distribution of the sensible that politics takes place. For him, the “overblown promises of identity” must be overcome through the creation of a class that belongs to no one in particular and thus potentially to everyone. Failing this, politics remains trapped in the consensual logic of negotiating interests, which is always a zero-sum game. Politics relies upon a unique agent, the *dēmos*. Its creation allows for new forms of part-taking to emerge.<sup>39</sup>

Example: within a heterosexist social body, individual performances of heterosexual *personae* are selected as meaningful and emerge as the identity of the higher-level social body. Nevertheless, non-heterosexual *personae* still abound in those societies, the difference being simply that they are normally filtered out, made invisible, and not counted as belonging to the policed order. Thus, whereas heterosexual *personae* operate as cogs of the heterosexist machine, homosexual *personae* have no part in it. What that means is that, due to a body’s regulation of its own performance, only some of its parts have their performances selected by the whole as functional components of its identity and become, therefore, marked as meaningful and visible. Conversely, the parts whose performances could endanger the survival of a given order are silenced and made invisible or “subaltern,” to use Gayatri Spivak’s term; in other words, they are refused membership as *personae* of the higher-level body.<sup>40</sup>

There are, however, some occasions in which certain *personae* are granted membership of a higher-level system whilst still not being recognised in the same way as other, more established, elements of that same system. Those are the times in which *personae* become visible as minority groups or, as Spivak noted, when “they can speak, [and] they’re within the hegemonic discourse

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction—Philosophy, Politics, Aesthetics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011), 67.

<sup>40</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308; and Leon de Kock, “Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 23, no. 3 (1992): 45–46.

[even if] wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed.”<sup>41</sup> Examples of minoritarian *personae* abound in today’s so-called multicultural societies—religious, sexual, and ethnic minorities, they are all counted as elements of the current liberal police order because they contribute to its thriving as a “free,” “democratic,” “diverse” and “multicultural” unit.

However, things have not always been like that and groups that are today considered minorities were before invisible, silent, or unaccounted for—subaltern. An example of this can be found in the historical emergence of the LGBT movement. As it was demonstrated by Foucault’s work on the genealogy of sexuality, homosexuality did not emerge as category until the end of the eighteenth century. It was only then that, through the appearance of what he called a “*scientia sexualis*,” itself developed thanks to the expansion of confessional modes of speech from religious to clinical domains, homosexuality emerged not only as a set of practices but as the recognisable identity of a minority.<sup>42</sup> Whereas in the Middle Ages “acts ‘contrary to nature’ [...] were perceived simply as an extreme form of acts ‘against the law’,” their prohibition being “essentially of a juridical nature,” with the development of a *scientia sexualis*, “[the] nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.”<sup>43</sup> As a result of the West’s will to knowledge, the behaviours deemed ‘*contra natura*’ that had always been practiced without making its practitioners appear any different were now being used to ground and sustain a new “pragmatics of self” that urged individuals who engaged in them to ‘come out’ as a particular kind of subject, to take up a certain kind of *persona*. As Foucault wrote:

Taking the example of sexual behavior and the history of sexual morality, I tried to see how and through what concrete forms of the relation to self the individual was *called upon to constitute him or herself* as the moral subject of his or her sexual conduct. In other words, [...] this involved

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<sup>41</sup> Kock, “Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” 46.

<sup>42</sup> See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 67–68.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 38; 43.

bringing about a shift from the question of the subject to the analysis of forms of subjectivation, and to the analysis of these forms of subjectivation through the techniques/technologies of the relation to self, or, if you like, through what could be called pragmatics of self.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, in line with what was already discussed above when addressing the relational nature of his concept of power, the pragmatics of self that, according to Foucault, triggered the emergence of the homosexual were not simply a set of discourses and disciplinary tactics imposed upon individuals from the outside but it also involved a certain degree of freedom and agency on the part of the individual who was “called upon” to constitute him or herself as a certain type of subject rather than being forced to do so. The expression “called upon” in the above quote is of great importance because it highlights how Foucault’s pragmatics of self depends as much on a constitutive *a priori* discursive *milieu* as it does on an individual’s freedom to constitute him or herself as a subject; how it simultaneously involves subjugation and autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, because, for Foucault, being a subject meant both to be subjected to power and to exercise power, rather than leading to a straightforward subjection of homosexuals, what the birth of the *scientia sexualis* also did was trigger the birth of the gay liberation movement. As he pointed out:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity;” but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5, (emphasis added).

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that this view of subjectivation was only put forward by Foucault towards the end of his career, for initially subjectivation was, for him, only a matter of external institutions (schools, prisons, hospitals, the military) and their ability to discipline individuals. As Joseph Tanke noted, “[the] subject, for the early Foucault, was the result of any numbers of discourses and disciplines imposed upon the individual. In his later genealogies of the subject, the picture is more complex, with subjectivation understood as the result of the techniques by which human beings are constituted and constitute themselves as subjects.” Joseph Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*, 66. See also Samuel Chambers discussion of Foucault’s work on subjectivation in Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 98–101.

own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.<sup>46</sup>

In Rancière’s terms, however, the agency and visibility of homosexuals could never be explained by the same logics that led to their subjugation. As it was seen above when discussing the differences between Foucault’s and Rancière’s notions of politics, for Rancière the becoming-visible of a particular set of bodies has nothing to do with the police order from which they had been excluded. The police is always an order and politics is always its disruption. The police is a way of counting that allows no supplement; politics is what creates the possibility of such supplement.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, if politics is the counting of the previously unaccounted-for, the appearance of the homosexual subject cannot be explained by the order it disrupted. Furthermore, whereas, in Foucault, the appearance of homosexuality as diagnosis made possible, *a posteriori*, the political struggles of the gay liberation movement, in Rancière that struggle could never be addressed as a mere side-effect or consequence of the appearance of the homosexual. Instead, the appearance of the homosexual was, itself, already a moment of disruption of the visible and, therefore, an instance of politics. As Rancière wrote in relation to class struggle:

The struggle between the rich and the poor is not social reality, which politics then has to deal with. It is the actual institution of politics itself. There is politics when there is a part of those who have no part, a part or party of the poor. Politics does not happen just because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity, [...] Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, in line with the theatrics of parts and wholes that is being discussed in this chapter, the birth of the homosexual can be described as the moment in history when a number of bodies whose misperformances had previously been

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<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 101.

<sup>47</sup> See above, p. 211–212.

<sup>48</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 11.

unaccounted for suddenly became visible, therefore disturbing the existing police order and its prescriptive allocation of roles to bodies. In other words, due to their persisting failure to perform in a way that would contribute positively to the existing distribution of the sensible, those body-parts became increasingly visible, a becoming-visible that was, for that same reason, already a moment of disruption of the existing heterosexual order. Therefore, the *scientia sexualis* that Foucault saw as the cause of the birth of the homosexual was, in fact, with its practices of diagnosis *and* treatment, not the cause but already a reaction, i.e. the response of the disrupted police to the political moment whereby a supplement to its mode of counting became apparent.

As a result of such a disruption, the levels of social entropy increased due to the amount of noise that started emerging from beneath meaningful patterns of performance. With such an increase in the visibility of ‘broken’ parts that, like splinter cancerous cells, started appearing at all levels of the social, from legislative chambers to broadcasting corporations, the previously favoured order of the sensible was no longer sustainable. A change in the system had to take place if it was to survive the homosexual disruption and reach another, albeit different and hopefully stable order.

It is at that tipping point that one can locate the shift towards normalisation that dominated the LGBT agendas in recent decades, a shift that marked the movement of queer identities from silence to visibility and then, finally, to fully recognised membership of the new liberal social order. In short, a move away from the “we’re here, we’re queer” slogans to “we’re here, and we’re just like you.” In what Lisa Duggan identified as a politics of homonormativity—although, in the context of the present argument, it should be seen as policing rather than politics—the recognition of LGBT individuals as full citizens of the state

[...did] not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but [upheld] and [sustained] them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.<sup>49</sup>

That was achieved through:

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<sup>49</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

[...a] recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: ‘equality’ [having become] narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ [having become] impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ [having become] domestic confinement, and democratic politics [having become] something to be escaped.<sup>50</sup>

By creating both a homosexual desire for assimilation as well as the conditions for it, Western social systems have managed to maintain their cohesion and induce an inversion of the escalating levels of entropy that had been caused by increasing volume of homosexual noise. That is nowhere more evident than in the recent concession of the homosexual right to marry and adopt, a concession that ultimately did nothing more than guarantee the survival of the fundamental pillars of the police that had been in place for centuries before homosexuals first came into visibility, i.e. the pillars of family and marriage. As such, rather than causing a fundamental shift in the organisation of Western social bodies, contemporary LGBT ‘politics’ have simply allowed for the already existing structures of governance to remain in place and flourish, and, as a consequence, for the system to thrive. As British Prime-Minister David Cameron has famously put it to his party conference in 2011 and in what amounted for a rather rare moment of lucidity, “I don’t support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I am a Conservative.”<sup>51</sup>

What the example of the LGBT movement reveals is how often what starts as politics in the sense given to it by Rancière ends up being assimilated into policing. In other words, how a disturbance in the ways a body performs itself/ its-self often leads to a reorganisation of that body’s performance aimed at a reduction of its levels of internal entropy and, ultimately, at its survival. In short, and to use terms familiar to readers of Deleuze and Guattari, how, for every

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 65–66.

<sup>51</sup> See Patrick Wintour, “David Cameron calls for Britain ‘to show some fight’,” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2011.

deterritorialisation, there has to be a reterritorialisation if a system is to survive.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, as the diagram below illustrates, when an encounter becomes political, a body ( $\psi$ ) witnesses a shift in the performed *persona* of another body it witnesses ( $\omega$ ). That shift, illustrated by the passage from the green to the blue *personae* of body  $\omega$ , amounts, literally, to a change of character, a movement away from a previously performed *persona*  $\alpha$  and towards a new *persona*  $\beta$ . In its passage from performed *persona*  $\alpha$  to performed *persona*  $\beta$ , the body  $\omega$  goes from being recognised by  $\psi$  to becoming estranged, in what constitutes an occasion of politics or, in Rancière's terms, a disruption in the existing order of the sensible (Fig. 25).

However, because bodies will tend towards survival, policing mechanisms are triggered to bring a body-part's disrupting performance into order. Therefore, in the diagram below, policing is what happens when the performed *persona* of body  $\omega$  goes back from unaccounted-for stranger to countable part, a movement that is illustrated by the purple arrow signing a return in the performed *personae* of  $\omega$  from  $\beta$  to  $\alpha$ . What that means is that, in order to maintain its order, either a return to a previous state was enforced, or that the system managed to incorporate the newly visible *persona* of body  $\omega$  into its system of counting, thus normalising what had theretofore appeared as unaccounted-for and, therefore, strange.

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<sup>52</sup> For more on 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation,' see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 326, 374; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9–10. Also, for an analysis of the different nuances of each concept as they appear in Deleuze and Guattari's work, as well as an example of how they can be used in a systems-theoretical context, see Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 78–79, 136.

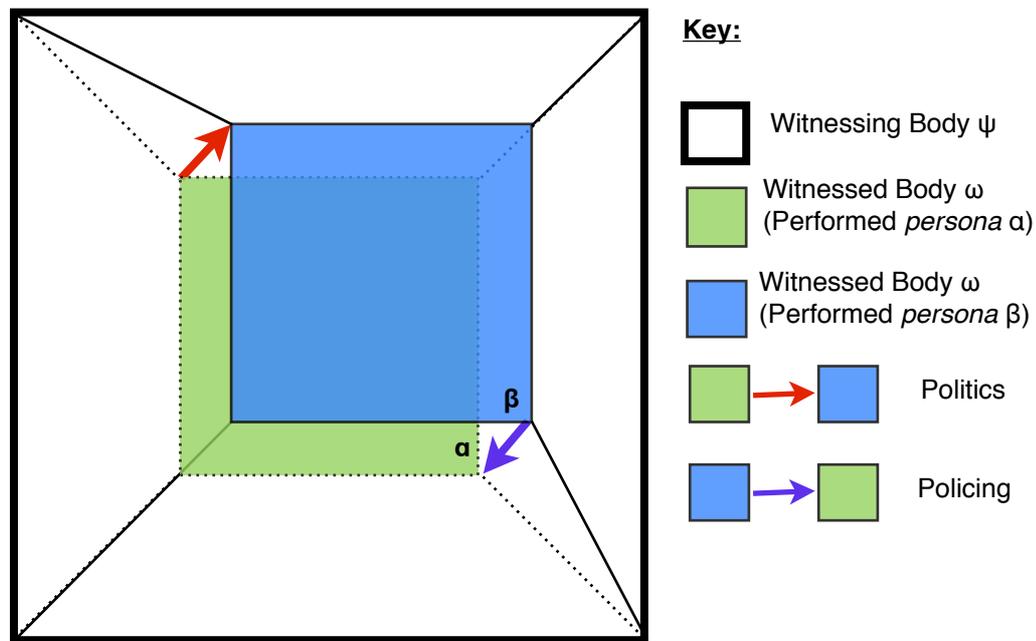


Fig. 25: Diagram of Politics and Policing.

### Queering Queer Politics

What, then, is the role played by queer bodies in the game of pushing and pulling between politics and policing that has just been sketched and how can the idea of queerness be used to talk about nonhuman encounters as it is used to talk about human ones? And, more importantly because this was the question with which this chapter began, what does an understanding of performance as the translation of bodies into informational versions of themselves which are, in turn, encountered by other bodies entail for a queer politics beyond the human?

When performance was proposed as the mechanism through which encounters are able to take place, a particular kind of *theatron* was sketched, one in which audiences never encounter performers directly but only the roles they perform, i.e. their contingent masks or *personae*. Those *personae* are what allows a body to either appear as a coherent, functional, and visible entity or to disappear and be filtered out as parasitic noise. As a consequence, identity, or how a body is accounted for, was conceived as always contingent on the encounters of that body with both its own body-parts and the other bodies that environ it as its world. Through processes of distinction and selection of the *personae* of its body-parts, a body is able to perform a sustainable identity, i.e. a

certain mode of appearing that allows for its continued survival with minimal disruptions to its internal, policed order.

Once formed and thriving, bodies—human, social, political, technological, animal, conceptual, etc.—are able to encounter new bodies and eventually become parts of higher-level systems of bodies. That, as it was already proposed, is done through performance: in forming relations, in encountering one another, bodies perform simplified or less entropic images of themselves, images that are contingent to each encounter and whose stability depends on the filtering out of noise or incoherent data. However, as it was also seen in previous chapters, there are moments in which noise is not fully filtered out, allowing for previously recognisable bodies to emerge as strangers from behind the contingency of their *personae* which then becomes apparent. Examples of such moments already discussed included human encounters with metaphor and aesthetic experience. In those cases, the performed *persona* of the encountered body becomes so noisy and excessive that its ability to have its performance recognised and counted as part of an *a priori* system is threatened. In Timothy Morton's words, the body appears as a "strange stranger."<sup>53</sup> In occasions such as those, a body goes from being accounted for as functional to being classified as broken through its performing in a way that had previously not been counted into the established order. In doing so, that body reveals that the *persona* it had been playing did not exhaust the full breadth of its being and that, in turn, opens up a *theatron* of estrangement rather than recognition as its appearance as stranger severs the body from the existing order of the sensible and allows it to stress its difference from both its performed self and its environment. Like in Brecht, it is estrangement that guarantees the becoming-political of the theatrical encounter.

Walter Benjamin's analysis of Brecht's epic theatre is useful here to clarify what happens when a body suddenly appears as a stranger that makes that encounter an occasion of politics. According to Benjamin, Brecht opposed his epic theatre to mainstream naturalistic theatre as it had been thought since Aristotle. Whereas Aristotle had seen theatre as a tool in the education of the citizen thanks to the latter's cathartic identification with the tragic hero, Brecht

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<sup>53</sup> See above, p. 185.

created instead a theatre that caused distanced astonishment rather than empathy. To quote Benjamin, “instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being.”<sup>54</sup> As a result, epic theatre was not so much about portraying actions as it was about unveiling the conditions under which those actions were taking place. Epic theatre, unlike naturalistic theatre, revealed the artificiality of that which appeared on stage, uncovered its conditions of production and, as such, alienated the audiences from the performance through a poetics of interruption—by interrupting the perceived continuity between performer and action being performed, by allowing the actor to flicker behind the role being played, epic theatre highlighted the abyss between an action and the conditions of its production, thus enabling the audience to question the givenness of history.<sup>55</sup> As Benjamin wrote, epic theatre

[...] will tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history, but the incommensurable and the singular. ‘It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way’—that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre.<sup>56</sup>

Expanding Benjamin’s analysis to all occasions in which bodies reveal the distance between themselves and their performed *personae*, one can argue that, when appearing as estranged parts of a system, bodies are able to question the givenness of the order of that system and, through that, reveal its contingency and potential for change. In short, by appearing as strangers, bodies disturb the existent distribution of the sensible, draw attention to the theatrical apparatus of all encounters and, therefore, enact politics in Rancière’s terms.

It is in that context that ‘queer’ can become a qualifier for all strange bodies, whether human or nonhuman, and only for as long as they remain strange, rather than merely being another designation for non-heterosexual human identities. Queer is the strange, noisy reality that exceeds whichever role,

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 18.

<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

character, or *persona* bodies happen to perform. Like the actor who acts away from his or her character in Brecht's epic theatre, the appearance of a body as queer is a moment when politics is instituted as a disturbance of the order of the sensible. Because, given their estrangement to one another, bodies are never able to reveal themselves fully and, therefore, have to encounter one another through the *personae* they play, queerness is the revelation of the theatrical abyss that will always separate bodies from one another and from the contingency of their performances.

As such, queer is not an identity. Queer is not to become recognisable as a category of bodies defined according to the measuring and management of their performances. Nor, consequently, can it be reduced to social movements organised according to principles of identity politics. Instead, queer is the distant core of all bodies, human and nonhuman, that always exceeds the ways in which bodies are encountered both by themselves and by others. Queer is that which will always remain strange, unspeakable, and unaccounted for.

But how is that to be thought once nonhumans come into play? Up until now most of the argument concerning estrangement has unfolded from a human viewpoint. Therefore, some work still needs to be done in order to take politics into the nonhuman. Whereas political thought has, throughout its history, been primarily concerned with human politics, the vertigo brought about by the current ecological age calls for an opening up of the space of politics onto the nonhuman so that a better understanding of both nonhuman-nonhuman and nonhuman-human encounters might take place. In the end, the planet itself is a system of so-called 'natural' and 'cultural' parts and often 'natural' encounters like clashes of hot and cold weather fronts trigger rather more 'cultural' consequences such as changes in urban planning whilst the opposite, as the Anthropocene thesis clearly implies, is also true.

### **Strange, Political Bodies**

In order to clarify what politics might mean beyond the human, three very different examples of political encounters will now be analysed. The first is the case of a broken tool as described by Heidegger; the second, the wasp-orchid

assemblage as it was thought by Deleuze and Guattari; and the third is the case of the human encounter with bodies known as ‘art’ and their triggering of aesthetic experience.

### Heidegger’s Hammer

The first example of a body enacting politics, i.e. disturbing the state of the system to which it belongs, is the Heideggerian case of the broken tool. According to Heidegger, the being of a tool is always grasped through its readiness to hand rather than through its actual presence. As the philosopher wrote, “[equipment] is essentially ‘something in-order-to...’.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, tools “never show themselves [...] as they are for themselves.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, their identity as a body is contingent on the function they are expected to perform. A hammer, for instance, is only known through its readiness to hammer, the hammering being that which retroactively marks it as the tool it is, as a hammer. As a result, Heidegger called the kind of being which tools possess, the way they manifest themselves as tools, a “*readiness-to-hand*.”<sup>59</sup>

However, tools sometimes fail. Sometimes the hammer no longer hammers, the axe no longer axes, the computer no longer computes. In those occasions, when tools fail or break down, something remarkable happens: the tool announces its strangeness beyond its function. By failing to perform as expected, tools reveal that their being is not exhausted by their readiness-to-hand or by whichever role they were expected to perform in the encounter in which they have been taking part. As Heidegger wrote:

When we concern ourselves with something, the entities which are most closely ready-to-hand may be met as something unusable, not properly adapted for the use we have decided upon. The tool turns out to be damaged, or the material unsuitable. [...] When its unusability is thus discovered, equipment becomes conspicuous. This *conspicuousness*

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), 97.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

presents the ready-to-hand equipment as in a certain un-readiness-to-hand. [...] Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment, but only to withdraw to the readiness-to-hand of something with which one concerns oneself—that is to say, of the sort of thing we find when we put it back into repair.<sup>60</sup>

When a computer breaks down, when it stops performing as expected, it reveals itself as it is outside the contingency of the roles it at any moment expected to perform. By breaking down, the computer becomes strange, it becomes queer, and humans no longer know what to do with it. In breaking down, a tool acts politically, it troubles the structure of the human-tool system in which it takes part and forces humans to rethink it. More often than not, however, the system can recuperate its order, reorganise or reterritorialise itself simply by, as Heidegger suggested, sending the tool to be repaired. At those times, mechanics, Apple Store geniuses, plumbers, etc., become law-enforcement agents, policing apparatuses. However, at other times the tool simply refuses to perform again as expected, to be re-educated, policed, or domesticated, and becomes clutter for the system that, in the name of hygiene and efficiency, often disposes of it—the final solution.

### Deleuze and Guattari's Wasp and Orchid

The second example of a political encounter is the case of the encounter between wasp and orchid as it was told by Deleuze and Guattari. In their Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explained how movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are always caught up in one another. Using the example of the wasp-orchid system the authors explained how, during the process of pollination of the orchid by the wasp, the orchid is deterritorialised by playing an image of a wasp in order to attract the real wasp, whereas the real wasp, although deterritorialised as part of the orchid's reproductive apparatus, does in turn reterritorialise the orchid by transporting its pollen.<sup>61</sup> Following the understanding of politics as a disturbance

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 102–103.

<sup>61</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 10.

in the distribution of the sensible, it is possible to argue that both wasp and orchid, in their respective deterritorialisations, call into question the roles they are usually expected to perform. By performing *waspness* while still remaining itself, the orchid challenges the *orchidness* that was granted to it from the outside—say, by an external human observer—and, therefore, it becomes broken-orchid. At the same time, through its deterritorialised performance as a functional part of the orchid—i.e. of its reproductive system—the wasp reveals itself to be more than the *waspness* it has been performing.

That, however, is only what happens at one level, at the level of the system [(wasp x orchid) x observer]. At the other level, at the level of the (wasp x orchid) system *per se*, no longer anchored on a human viewpoint, the dynamics of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, or of non-human politics and policing, take a different shape. Because, for the wasp, the orchid begins by performing as a fellow wasp willing to procreate, politics only happens when the orchid fails to perform the wasp, i.e. when it fails to behave as its reproductive partner and is, therefore, deterritorialised as orchid. What that shows is that politics can only be conceived in relation to a particular system, because what is political in the (wasp x orchid) system, i.e. the failure of the orchid to perform as wasp, becomes policing in the context of the wider [(wasp x orchid) x observer] system, for it is in its failure to effectively perform wasp at the eyes of a human observer that the orchid is able to maintain its state of *orchidness*. In short, every system has its preferred state or territory and any troubling of it can only be grasped as such by an observer that is also placed within that same system. Therefore, what is seen as a disturbance within a given system can appear as that which conversely maintains the order of a higher-level system of which the former a sub-set.

To sum up, what has been argued in relation to both the human-tool system and the wasp-orchid encounter is that, in both cases, there were bodies that ceased to perform as expected, bodies whose performances became noisy and that, as a result, became estranged. In doing so, those nonhuman bodies troubled the distribution of the sensible within the systems of relations to which they belonged and, therefore, became political. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, in both examples, and thanks to their estrangement, bodies acquired surplus

value and increased their valence—they became queer in their becoming-other.<sup>62</sup>

### The 'Work of Art'

A third example of bodies performing politically can be found in the human encounter with the type of objects normally described as 'art.' As it has been proposed throughout this dissertation, all encounters in the world happen through performance. From fire burning cotton to human-computer interfaces or human-human social systems, no body is ever able to disclose itself fully to another. All encounters, as systems theory shows, can only take place and be sustained through processes of distinction, selection, and exclusion of information from noise. In order to be accounted for as an element of a wider body-system, a body-part has to perform a role that contributes for the maintenance of the lower levels of entropy of the system in relation to its environment. It is through that economic logic of a system that value emerges as the result a hierarchisation of body-images according to their ability to maintain the state of that system. However, as it was seen, in occasions of estrangement, tools break down, bodies cease to perform as expected, and the distribution of the sensible upon which the state of the system had been dependent is called into question. Those are the times of politics. But how does politics happen in the human encounter with 'art'?

At the end of Chapter Two above, estrangement was defined by combining together Heidegger's reflections on the 'work of art,' Harman's concept of "allure," and Brecht's "*Verfremdung*." As the dissertation progressed, the notion of estrangement was expanded beyond the realm of art practice and posited as a potential political outcome of all kinds of encounters. Now, it is time to go back to the 'work of art' and to further analyse the conditions under which it can become strange and, therefore, perform politically.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière claimed that "[artistic] practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

forms of visibility.”<sup>63</sup> Following on from that claim, it is possible to argue that aesthetics, understood as the specific encounter between a human spectator and a ‘work of art,’ is political because the way in which the ‘work of art’ performs points towards some withdrawn, inaccessible reality, therefore affecting the established distribution of the sensible. As in all other occasions of estrangement beyond the human spheres of ‘art’ and ‘Culture,’ that intervention is done by having a body perform in such a way that the theatrical conditions of the encounter are highlighted and the body is brought forward as a stranger. In short, following Rancière, in the aesthetic encounter the ‘work of art’ is encountered in the same way that Heidegger encountered its broken hammer: with astonishment and surprise.

That, for instance, was what happened, when, in 2001, South African artist Steven Cohen performed an intervention in the shanty town of Newtown, Johannesburg. For that performance, which the artist called *Chandelier: To Bring to Light*, Cohen arrived in Newtown wearing a chandelier as if it was a tutu, tights, and giant high-heels. The bare parts of his body were covered in make-up, fake eyelashes had been glued to his eyelids, and a star of David made out of crystals had been drawn on his forehead (Fig. 26).



Fig. 26: Steven Cohen, *Chandelier*, 2001. Photo: John Hogg.

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<sup>63</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 13.

Faced with the sight of Cohen's queer body—a mixture of man and woman, white Jewishness and 'chandeliness,' some men became angry and insulted the artist, whilst others seemed to want to have sex, to kill him, or both. The women, on the other hand, appeared to have a very different reaction to the presence of such strange body, with some referring to the artist as 'angel' or 'Jesus' and, along with the only albino man present at the scene, offering themselves as human shields to protect the artist from the angry men who, at one point, tried to reach him. The performance went on until nightfall, with Cohen often falling down on his knees due to tiredness, the weight of the chandelier hanging from his shoulders, and the difficulty of trying to walk on enormous high-heels amongst all the debris on the ground (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27: Steven Cohen, *Chandelier*, 2001. Photo: John Hogg.

The performance was recorded by Cohen's partner, produced as a DVD, and eventually screened during one of the sessions of the Visual Cultures MPhil/ PhD seminars at Goldsmiths in 2010. The response to the video from the PhD cohort was generally negative: issues of race kept coming up, as did issues of colonialism. In the end, Cohen was a white man arriving at a shanty town of Johannesburg populated exclusively by poor black people in order to, according to the subtitle of the intervention, bring them light. It seems fair to claim the work is problematic due to the race relations, colonialist exploitation, and the white-man Enlightenment that it seems to reenact or at least depict. However, it is also possible to see something else happening there, in Newtown, and also

here (or there) in London. True, it can be argued that Cohen arrived in Newtown like the white coloniser arrived in Africa, carrying the light of Western ideas, religion, and morals. It can also be argued that, by making a commercial DVD out of it, the artist ended up furthering his exploitation of the black people of Newtown. Nevertheless, the work seems to have a different side to it, one that is highlighted by the queerness that Cohen revealed about himself, by the difficulty that both the black people of Newtown and the PhD cohort in London have had in grasping Cohen's performance in a clear, unequivocal way.

Cohen did not just appear in Newtown as a white man, a coloniser. Rather, his performance of identity was noisy from the start, a fact that is evidenced by the divergent reactions to it found amongst both the people of Newtown and the Visual Cultures PhD cohort. Cohen's performance, aimed simultaneously at the people living in the shanty town and at his western audiences, was broken and incoherent from the moment he arrived to the moment he left that shanty town. By simultaneously performing roles that would usually be seen as incommensurable with one another—i.e. masculinity, femininity, thingness, European master, Jewish slave, etc.—Cohen was able to push his performance to its limit and, in doing so, appear broken, political, like the computer that stops computing when overloaded with too much data, with too much noise. The result of that is nowhere more evident than in the different reactions the people of Newtown had to his presence, not knowing whether to attack him or pray to him, whether to desire or kill him. In that way, *Chandelier* disrupted the order of the sensible, understood from the point of view of both Newtown's social order and the Western colonial history. Not only has Cohen pushed his work beyond performances of race, gender, and sexuality, and dichotomies of coloniser/colonised recognisable in South Africa, but he has also appeared in Western eyes as a troubling of their own white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and imperial history.

Faced with disruptions of the sensible such as the one enacted by Steven Cohen's work, the systems in which those disruptions take place will only have two options: they can either readjust themselves in order to accommodate the previously unaccounted for performances, or they can face dissolution. However, because normally systems tend towards survival, the most efficient solution is a reorganisation of the sensible so that queer performances can

become normalised and entropy levels reduced. That, as it was already seen above, was what happened with the normalisation of homosexuality. It was also what happened with the commodification of radical ideologies in late capitalism, illustrated by the mass circulation of Che Guevara t-shirts, the appropriation of punk aesthetics by the fashion industry, or the inclusion of anarchist rhetoric in the discourse of financial capitalism. And it has also happened at the level of gender identity.

As an example, transgender individuals are often quoted referring to a progressive realisation that their bodies were not working in sync with their own image of themselves, with their own sense of identity. In those cases, the individuals appear broken, their bodies do not perform as expected. A distance is encountered between an individual's body, his own self-identity, and the identity ascribed to him or herself by other individuals. A disruption in the order of the visible takes place and the body appears alien to itself. If the disruption is too strong, the individual will attempt to readjust to his or her new situation by renegotiating all the performances of the different parts of his or her body into a new stable identity that will be able to guarantee his or her survival, be it 'male,' 'female,' or any other established gender category. If that readjustment does not take place, more often than not suicide appears as the logical solution—if the body cannot perform coherently, it will often lead itself to destruction. For that reason, different strategies were put in place to administrate that queer body, starting with the confession of a different gender identity and going all the way to the modern provision of gender reassignment surgery and hormonal treatments. Because bodies tend to pursue lower levels of entropy, most instances of queer gender identity end up restructured and reconfigured into one of two options available, either male or female. In that sense, gender reassignment is also a process of policing, one that tries to administer the political disturbance that was a body's incoherent performance of gender.

It is that same kind of dialectic of politics and policing that can also be found in the eventual normalisation of works of art that had previously been deemed valueless or threatening to the state. By including previously ignored or rejected pieces in museums and galleries, by managing their appearance through wall and catalogue texts, and by turning them into mere commodities traded around the world for prohibitive sums of money, modern society has been able to turn

bodies of work that could otherwise perform dangerously into tools of reaffirmation of the value of its own history and cultural identity. By framing strange bodies within the boundaries of institutions that mediate their encounter, Western civilisation managed to turn the potentially dangerous into the politically neutral and perfectly functional. In short, by creating a canon of its own art works, social systems were able to turn estranged bodies into cogs operating for the maintenance of the state.

One of the latest examples of the constant game of pushing and pulling between politics and governmentality can be found in the progression of performance art from marginal art form to hot topic in mainstream cultural circuits. Whereas, only in 1960, Samuel Delany was struggling to make sense of Allan Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* at a Manhattan flat, recent years have seen, amongst others, the MoMA host the blockbuster show "Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present," the release of its homonymous feature-length documentary, the opening of Tate Modern's Tanks dedicated to time-based art, the nomination of Spartacus Chetwynd for the Turner Prize, the award of the Golden Lion for Best Artist in the International Exhibition to Tino Sehgal at the *Biennale di Venezia*, the design and successful crowd-funding of the Marina Abramović Institute, and the release of Jay Z's *Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film*, in which the millionaire rapper is seen rapping and dancing in front of the likes of Marina Abramović, Andres Serrano, Alan Cumming, or Roselee Goldberg at New York's Pace Gallery (Fig. 28).<sup>64</sup>

Such an upgrade of the cultural status of performance art appears even more dramatic once one considers that, not that long ago, in 1993, Peggy Phelan

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<sup>64</sup> See "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present," MoMA, accessed August 27, 2013, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/965>; "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present," Show of Force LLC and Mudpuppy Films Inc., accessed August 27, 2013, <http://marinafilm.com>; Charlotte Higgins, "Tate Modern unlocks Tanks—and introduces live art into mainstream," *The Guardian*, July 17, 2012; "Turner Prize 2012," Tate, accessed August 27, 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2012>; David Batty, "Tino Sehgal wins Golden Lion for best artist at Venice Biennale," *The Guardian*, accessed August 27, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/01/tino-sehgal-golden-lion-best-artist>; Roslyn Sulcas, "Marina Abramovic Kickstarter Campaign Passes Goal," *Arts Beat: The Culture at Large* (blog), *The New York Times*, August 26, 2013, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/26/marina-abramovic-kickstarter-campaign-passes-goal/>; Guy Trebay, "Jay-Z is Rhyming Picasso and Rothko," *The New York Times*, accessed August 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/fashion/jay-z-is-rhyming-picasso-and-rothko.html>; and "Jay Z 'Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film,'" YouTube video, 10:46, posted by JAY Z's Life+Times, August 2, 2013, <http://youtu.be/xMG2oNqBy-Y>.

declared performance “the runt of the litter of contemporary art [...clogging] the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.”<sup>65</sup> Jay-Z’s “performance art film” might do many things, but damaging the smooth circulation of capital does not appear to be one of them.



Fig. 28: RoseLee Goldberg dances with Jay-Z during the filming of *Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film*, 2013. Photo: liachavez on Instagram (<http://instagram.com/p/bmB6ZiAQDj/>).

The passage of performance art from underground spaces to the biggest stages of contemporary art is widely praised in mainstream media as a coming-of-age for the genre.<sup>66</sup> However, whether it is a coming-of-age or not, the reality is that, like with many other cultural products that have moved from underground to mainstream, the incorporation of performance art into the contemporary art canon has resulted in a policing of its reception and, therefore, in a loss of its politics through the framing of the ways in which it is expected to be encountered. By entering the sanitised walls of the world’s biggest art spaces, performance art has found itself inside a safe space where, no matter what it

<sup>65</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Matthew Cain, “Making performance art mainstream at the Tate,” *Cain on Culture* (blog), *Channel 4*, July 16, 2012, <http://blogs.channel4.com/culture/tate-modern-launches-gallery-performance-art/3043>; and, Robin Pogrebin, “Once on Fringe, Performance Art is Embraced,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2012.

does, it can do it without causing any disturbance to the world outside. If, added to that, one considers the ego-driven project of the Marina Abramović Institute, dedicated, amongst other things, to teaching the “Abramović Method,” a series of workshops aimed at helping the public “develop skills for observing long durational performances,” it becomes clear that, today, there are strong cultural forces aiming to turn performance art from a stranger into something much more familiar.<sup>67</sup> As a result of those moves, the actualisation of the political potential of performance art is becoming increasingly rare for, as this chapter has argued, the political agency of a body is inversely proportional to the familiarity of its roles.

Heretofore, this chapter has claimed that, once bodies become estranged, they cause a disturbance in the order of the sensible and, therefore, their performance becomes political. In other words, this chapter has shown that politics happens every time bodies break down, every time they fail to perform coherently or as expected. Because, in doing so, bodies reveal the contingency of their performances, entropy levels rise, and the internal order of systems emerge as fragile and ephemeral phenomena. Further to that, the chapter has also claimed that, for every occasion of politics, there is normally a response in the form of policing; for every deterritorialisation, a reterritorialisation; for every border crossed, another one that is built not too far away. Moreover, the chapter has shown that to be the case with all political encounters whether between humans and humans, humans and nonhumans, or nonhumans and nonhumans. Now, before this section is drawn to an end, it is time to consider what kind of practical consequences will all of that entail for humans, for the human understanding of belonging, and for the ways humans choose to act in the world. In short, it is time to consider how the argument presented so far can trigger the emergence of other, more ecological, experiences of community.

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<sup>67</sup> “The Abramovic Method,” Marina Abramović Institute, accessed August 25, 2013, <http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/mission/the-abramovic-method>.

## Performance, Politics, and the Community to Come

For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is that which “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, estrangement, through its reshuffling of the sensible, is able to evoke a new kind of community, what Deleuze and Guattari called “a people to come.”<sup>69</sup> But what kind of people is that “people to come”? What community is the coming community?

When thinking about performance in its relationship to community, there is one author whose work is unavoidable: Victor Turner. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner used the term *communitas* to identify the feeling of belonging that individuals experience during the liminal stage of a ritual. Whereas outside the space-time of that stage of a ritual the world is structured and organised, i.e. governed, during the liminal phase the pre-ritual boundaries between individuals as well as the hierarchies amongst them are blurred, allowing for the group to emerge as an unstructured, i.e. undifferentiated, “community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”<sup>70</sup> Referring to Arnold van Gennep’s classification of the three phases of rituals of passage, Turner pointed out that rituals are characterised by a first stage —“separation”—in which individuals or groups are detached from the social structure, which is then followed by a second state—“margin” or “*limen*”—in which the ritual subject appears as having ambiguous, unclassifiable characteristics. Finally, a third stage—“aggregation”—in which the individuals are returned back to the social order albeit transformed by the ritual experience they have been through.<sup>71</sup>

Turner’s schematisation of ritual processes are close to what has been already discussed in this chapter in relation to politics in that rituals of passage are also a game of pushing and pulling between politics, understood as a disturbance that is performed in the visible order of the system, and policing, taken to mean

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<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

<sup>69</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick and London: AldineTransaction, 1995), 96.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, 94–95, 129.

the processes through which a disturbed system is able to reorganise itself in order to lower its levels of entropy and survive.

Crucially, it is during the second phase of ritual that *communitas* is felt. Having reached an ambiguous or incoherent state during the liminal stage, individuals are then, according to Turner, able to

elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. [...] Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense *comradeship and egalitarianism*. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized.<sup>72</sup>

Liminality and order of a system are, therefore, diametrically opposed. Whereas an organised social system is characterised by partiality, heterogeneity and structured differentiation of its parts based on systems of nomenclature, sexual and gender distinctions, visibility, etc., liminality is instead marked by transition, homogeneity, equality, anonymity, *communitas*, and silence.<sup>73</sup>

However, and still following Turner, liminality is not just a characteristic of rituals of passage. All conflicts within social systems are solved through a similar dialectic of liminality and order in what Turner called “social drama” due to its similarities with theatre:

[In social dramas, a] person or subgroup breaks a rule, deliberately or by inward compulsion, in a public setting. Conflicts between individuals, sections, and factions follow the original breach, revealing hidden clashes of character, interests, and ambition. These mount toward a crisis of the group’s unity and continuity unless rapidly sealed off by redressive public action, consensually undertaken by the group’s leaders, elders, or guardians.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 95 (emphasis added).

<sup>73</sup> See *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Victor Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds. Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 39.

Following that logic, both rituals and social dramas are responsible for the opening up of a space for *communitas* where the liminal subjects, i.e. those who break out of the order of the system, recognise what they have in common and acknowledge each other as comrades, as equals, before being once again differentiated, given roles, and brought back into order.

However, although similar to the dynamics of politics and policing described above, there is something in the dialectic of liminality and order identified by Turner in rituals of passage and social dramas that does not fit in with the view of politics proposed earlier in this chapter. In Turner, as it has just been seen, *communitas* takes place when an individual identifies with another individual. What triggers that identification is, as Turner also argued, a human being's recognition of his fellow humans. *Communitas* has to do with the shared "human condition" that is seen uniting all humans regardless of their differences.<sup>75</sup>

Because the understanding of politics posited in this chapter is grounded on estrangement rather than recognition, Turner's thesis whereby *communitas* has to do with the identification of that which is common to all is irreconcilable with the position advanced heretofore. If politics happens when tools stop functioning or orchids become wasps that become orchids, then the idea that somehow, in those broken encounters, the participating bodies will be able to recognise something of themselves in one another is, to say the least, rather improbable. Expecting to directly identify oneself with a hammer that has just stopped hammering, or with a computer that has just stopped computing does not seem very realistic. If anything, when the computer breaks down while being used, the distance between user and machine is not reduced to the point of becoming an encounter of equals but, rather, increases exponentially to a stage of absolute, irreconcilable difference. Claiming that politics will allow humans to form new communities of equals that will include beings such as hammers, computers, icebergs, orchids, concepts, double-decker buses, and political manifestos, does not seem feasible. Even if all elements being considered were human, still that idyllic identification with the other through the recognition of something shared would almost certainly not happen. Human societies have

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<sup>75</sup> See Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 130.

already been through many centuries of trying to unite all humans under the banner of a shared ‘Humanity’ and it’s well known where that has led—different human communities are still increasingly estranged from one another, multiculturalism doesn’t seem to have worked, and contemporary Islamophobia doesn’t seem to go away by claiming that, despite everything, muslims are still human. Furthermore, the task of building communities based in recognition and identification becomes harder under the light of the current ecological crisis and the ways in which it troubles what have heretofore been the certainties of the human and its epistemological paradigms. If the boundaries between ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ have been blurred in such a way that humans have been forced to accept the contingency of all encounters whilst simultaneously realising the depth and complexity of the entanglement of bodies, human and nonhuman, then identification and recognition are no longer tenable in the long run.

There is yet another, ecological problem that emerges out of the practices of recognition and identification on which *communitas* as defined by Turner has been grounded. That is the problem of moral considerability or of who or what deserves to be on the receiving end of one’s consideration. As Thomas Birch noted in his brilliant essay “Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration,” traditional views on moral considerability usually presuppose the need for a criterion according to which some beings are classified as possessing moral standing and, therefore, given moral consideration.<sup>76</sup> When, for instance, P.E.T.A. had an advertising campaign with actress Traci Bingham, naked, sporting the names of different beef cuts written on the corresponding parts of her body, its defence of vegetarianism was grounded on the equation of animals with (female) humans (Fig. 29). If, as the advertisement read, “All Animals Have the Same Parts”—if, that is, ‘they’ are just like ‘us’—and if ‘we’ deserve moral consideration, then ‘they’ must deserve it to.

What the example of P.E.T.A. illustrates is a general view on moral considerability that, according to Birch, presupposes the following:

- (1) that when it comes to moral considerability, there *are*, and *ought to be*, insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens (for example, slaves,

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<sup>76</sup> See Thomas Birch, “Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration,” *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 4 (1993): 315.

barbarians, and women), “members of the club” of *consideranda* versus the rest; (2) that we *can* and *ought* to identify the mark, or marks, of membership; (3) that we *can* identify them in a rational and non-arbitrary fashion; and (4) that we *ought* to institute practices that enforce the marks of membership and the integrity of the club, as well, of course, as maximizing the good of its members.<sup>77</sup>



Fig. 29: Traci Bingham for P.E.T.A., *All Animals Have the Same Parts*, 2002. Print advertisement.

The problem with that view is that, because it operates by distinguishing information from noise, efficient performances from inefficient ones, it ought to be seen as an instance of governmentality or policing rather than an occasion of ecological politics from which a community of strangers can finally emerge and be sustained. Therefore, and as Birch argued:

[The] institution of *any* practice of *any* criterion of moral considerability is an act of power over, and ultimately an act of violence toward, those others who turn out to fail the test of the criterion and are therefore not permitted to enjoy the membership benefits of the club of *consideranda*.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 317.

That is not, however, the only problem found in Turner's notion of *communitas* when analysed from the standpoint of this dissertation's take on politics. As it has hopefully become clear by now, politics is understood throughout this chapter as that which happens when bodies break out of character, reveal the distance that separates the contingency of their roles from the absolute strangeness of their being, and, in doing so, end up troubling the state of the system in which they had been included. As a consequence, because the only thing bodies will ever be able to grasp unequivocally during an encounter is the insurmountable *theatron* separating them regardless of how entangled they might be at any given moment, they won't ever be able to identify with one another or to enter into sustainable relations of kinship.

As a consequence, a different understanding of *communitas* is needed if indeed the only certain community is a community of strangers. Such new understanding must depart from the absolute alterity that is unveiled through estrangement rather than from the contingent recognitions and identifications that are only conceivable once one ignores the theatrical space of all encounters. *Communitas* needs to emerge from the realisation that all performances are contingent, ephemeral, and unable to exhaust the being of the bodies they refer to. What is needed is a sense of community that does not take identity as an *a priori* but that knows that what is today recognised might tomorrow appear strange.

A notion of *communitas* similar to the one being looked for here can be found in the work of Roberto Esposito. In his book *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Esposito troubled dominant definitions of community by analysing the etymology of '*communitas*.' For the Italian philosopher, the definition of community that dominates contemporary political and philosophical debates—the one encountered, for instance, in the work of Victor Turner—is highly contradictory: according to it, what is shared by the members of a

community is both private property of each individual and also, paradoxically, something that belongs to them all.<sup>79</sup>

Against that deeply contradictory definition, Esposito highlighted that,

[in] all neo-Latin languages [...], “common” [...] is what is *not* proper [...], that begins where what is proper ends: “*Quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium.*” It is what belongs to more than one, to many or to everyone, and therefore is that which is “public” in opposition to “private” or “general” [...] in contrast to “individual” [...].<sup>80</sup>

The latin maxim quoted by Esposito, “*Quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium*” does indeed highlight the paradox at the centre of dominant notions of community. Attributed to Roman rhetorician Quintilian, the sentence translates into English as “what we share with another ceases to be our own.”<sup>81</sup> The paradox is, thus, evident: community cannot be thought of as the totality of those who have something in common—say, a shared humanity—because it already implies that, somehow, individuals who share their possessions end up losing them. What starts by being private so that it can be shared becomes public once shared; therefore, it is no longer owned by any of the individuals doing the sharing. Going back to Turner, if individuals were to discover their shared humanity through ritual and social drama, then they would have to, paradoxically, let go of the humanity they thought to possess in the first place. In short, by claiming that “I am just like you,” one is actively disposing of whatever it is that makes oneself and the other two modes of the same substance, two individuals of the same species.

As a consequence, rather than being gained, in *communitas* there is always something that is given away. Esposito stresses that aspect by once again going back to the etymological history of the term when noting that the meaning

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<sup>79</sup> As he put it:

“[the] truth is that these conceptions [of community] are united by the ignored assumption that community is a ‘property’ belonging to subjects that join them together [...]: an attribute, a definition, a predicated that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality [...], or as a ‘substance’ that is produced by their union.” Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Jon Stone, ed. *The Routledge Dictionary of Latin Quotations: The Illiterati’s Guide to Latin Maxims, Mottoes, Proverbs, and Sayings* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), 101.

of ‘*munus*,’ from which ‘*communitas*’ was derived, oscillates between ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’ (‘*onus*’ or ‘*officium*’) and ‘gift’ (‘*donum*’). *Communitas* is not about possessing something that the other also possesses and, therefore, forming a community around that shared possession. Instead, *communitas* is fundamentally about owing something to the other, about an unconditional duty of giving. Against Turner, *communitas* “doesn’t by any means imply the stability of a possession and even less the acquisitive dynamic of something earned, but loss, subtraction, transfer. It is a ‘pledge’ or a ‘tribute’ that one pays in an obligatory form.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, the ‘common’ in ‘*communitas*’ is not the property of all by being the property of every single one; it is, rather, the “voiding [...] of property into its negative.”<sup>83</sup> As Esposito explained:

[In *communitas*,] subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure within which they can establish transparent communication or even a content to be communicated. They don’t find anything else except *that void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves*; [...] Therefore the community cannot be thought of as a body, as a corporation [...] in which individuals are founded in a larger individual. Neither is community to be interpreted as a mutual, intersubjective ‘recognition’ in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity; [...] *Communitas*] isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: *a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject*.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, *Communitas* is founded on the absolute absence or lack of a ground, on the recognition that nothing is ever fully shared. *Communitas* is vertiginous. It can only be said of those who, as absolute strangers, are found to always differ from both each other and their own performed images of themselves. The being of community, in Esposito’s words, “is the interval of difference, the spacing that brings us into relation with others in a common non-

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<sup>82</sup> Esposito, *Communitas*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

belonging, in this loss of what is proper that never adds up to a common 'good'."<sup>85</sup>

In the *communitas* that real politics opens up the impossibility of belonging is recognised through the unveiling of the absolute strangeness of all bodies, human and nonhuman, of their ultimate and non negotiable difference from each other and from any of their performed *personae*. The community that, after Rancière and Deleuze and Guattari, is to come through a troubling of the order of the sensible, is not a community of shared possessions. Instead, it is a community of those that either have nothing in common or that, in having something in common, they won't ever be able to recognise it with absolute certainty. By revealing the contingency of all the ways in which bodies encounter one another, the contingency of every order of the sensible, of every state/State, politics not only questions the givenness of the phenomenal world, but it also insists on the other-worldliness of the real. As such, in its revelation of the indisputable strangeness of bodies, politics calls for an ethical duty of care, albeit one that is not aimed at one's own siblings but at the truly Other that is to be found both around and inside oneself. Because politics reveals the ephemeral nature of the performed structures upon which worlds are built, it calls for universal consideration for all Others, humans and nonhumans, as strangers in their own world; it calls for consideration for all beings due to their inability to ever be fully known either by themselves or by one another. By revealing that a real body is always in excess of the ways in which it appears in the world, such a politics of estrangement turns the impossibility of ever fully knowing the other into an opportunity for respecting it, a respect that arises from the acknowledgement of that body's singularity and not of the qualities or identity it might appear to share with other bodies or with oneself. In a Levinasian sense, it is only the recognition of the absolute strangeness of the face—not of the mask, not of the *persona*—of another body brought forth by politics that can, in Lévinas' words, announce the "ethical inviolability of the Other."<sup>86</sup> As Lévinas wrote in a way that resonates with the argument presented so far:

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>86</sup> Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. [...]

The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus [...]. The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity.<sup>87</sup>

In that sense, politics is the discovery of the strangeness of the other beyond the contingency and ephemerality of its performances. It therefore allows for ethics to emerge as a gesture aimed at the whole universe and at all of its parts, aimed, that is, at human and nonhuman bodies alike and always in accordance with the ultimate foreignness of their being. Only by bringing forth a community of irreconcilable strangers will a more ecological future be possible beyond the contingencies of recognition and temporary structures of kinship. Only when the question of whether or not a body deserves to be considered ethically is fully ruled out, will all bodies be able to inhabit a world in which consideration is given *a priori* to all bodies and where the entanglement of humans and nonhumans will be allowed to emerge as a reality not to be avoided but, rather, to be honoured and taken care of in all its ungraspable but always seductive strangeness. In Dipesh Chakrabarty's words:

[Climate] change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 194. It is important to note that, although Lévinas did not think that encounters with nonhuman faces could ever trigger ethical responses, when, for instance, claiming that “[the] absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me [...]” (Ibid., 73), nonetheless there is a strong argument that some authors have made in support of the adequacy of Levinasian ethics to encounters with nonhumans for, indeed, the actual logic of Levinas' argument concerning the position of the Other does call for its extension into the nonhuman as a subject of ethics. For more on that discussion, see Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 55–77.

the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 222.

—CONCLUSION—

**Performance After the End of the World**

*'Why are you wearing that stupid bunny suit?'*  
*'Why are you wearing that stupid man suit?'*  
 —Donnie Darko<sup>1</sup>

It's July 2013 and the news hasn't been cheerful for a while. Between the most recent scandal concerning the leaked existence of illegal global surveillance apparatuses whose smoothly-running algorithms put any wannabe-007 to shame to the Summer Arctic ice cap that some expect to fully melt for the first time already this decade; from the bacteria that have become fast learners and now deflect the attacks of the strongest antibiotics to the torrential Summer rains that have taken the Vltava and the Danube indoors, the human condition in the first decades of the 21st century is anything but human. As a species, as one amongst an ever growing number of different taxa of bodies, humans find themselves increasingly entangled in and conditioned by realities that for many centuries were thought to be contained outside the human sphere, there where they could be safely mastered.<sup>2</sup>

While scientists discover with surprise the increasingly tight enmeshment of realities whose boundaries can no longer be safely told apart, critical paradigms of scholarly work that had kept the human at the centre of the world start to

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<sup>1</sup> *Donnie Darko*, directed by Richard Kelly, DVD, colour, 113 min (Enfield: Prism Leisure Corporation, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> For more on those news, see Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill, "NSA Prism program taps in to user data of Apple, Google and others," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2013; David Kramer, "Scientists alarmed by rapidly shrinking Arctic ice cap," *Physics Today* 66, no. 2 (2013), 17; Ian Sample, Fiona Harvey and Denis Campbell, "UK raises alarm on deadly rise of superbugs," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2013; and Reuters, "Floods inundating central Europe kill at least seven people," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2013.

progressively be questioned: humans themselves are being accepted as slippery beings and their knowledge of the world approached as just one episode in a huge number of encounters that happen every day between all kinds of bodies. Today, one can argue that such a world of cross-taxa entanglements and hybridisation has brought about the realisation that, despite all that has gone since Kant, humans no longer occupy an exceptional position as the rulers of the real.<sup>3</sup> In an age marked by the realisation that the planet's ecosystems have reached tipping points which, in turn, have accelerated the unfolding of a series of global ecological disasters that humankind won't be able to master let alone reverse, divisions of knowledge into comfortable disciplines —some preoccupied solely with human 'Culture,' others exclusively concerned with nonhuman 'Nature'—are being questioned by the realisation that the boundaries that separate those two realms, in being there, have become blurred and hard to pin down.

Nevertheless, despite deeply entangled in one another, bodies can never fully grasp, let alone master each other—relations appear today to always be contingent and the way in which bodies encounter one another as *relata* seems to always leave parts of those bodies untranslated, i.e. unreadable, whilst also always attaching new accidental qualities to them.<sup>4</sup> If that were not the case, i.e. if bodies could be exhausted by their encounters, nothing of their being would survive the removal of the other bodies on whose encounter their existence had been predicated. And similarly, if bodies were to give themselves fully to one another in every encounter no surprises would ever happen, discoveries would not be made, disasters would be averted, and knowledge would have to always be absolute and, therefore, also stagnant.

As a consequence, with the rediscovered perversion in the ways bodies get down with and affect one another, with the realisation that appearances are always co-created, contingent, and never exhaust the being of the bodies for which they stand, questions eventually started being raised concerning the nature of what had hitherto been seen as the exclusive domain of the human

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<sup>3</sup> See Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*.

<sup>4</sup> This point was introduced above as part of Chapter Two, developed from readings of Graham Harman's version of Object-Oriented Ontology clearly synthesised in Harman, *L'Objet Quadruple*.

and of its 'Culture.' If, following the postulates of Object-Oriented Ontology, there is always an inaccessible real lying behind the contingencies of all 'worldings,' always something about the 'in-themselves' that will not be included in the 'in-them-for-us,' always a filtration of noise preceding the selection of patterns that eventually stand in for bodies; if all encounters depend as much on who or what is encountered as on who or what encounters, as much on who or what is witnessed as on who or what does the witnessing; and if, therefore, all relations are phenomenal entanglements, then the work being done today in the Humanities could benefit not only from thinking the contingency and opacity of its object of study but also from addressing the significant amount of nonhuman agency that is often at work in every inch of 'humanity' one encounters in the world.

With the discovery of the increasing and unavoidable enmeshment of bodies of which the Anthropocene is only the latest symptom, as well as the insurmountable distance that prevents all bodies from fully mastering both themselves and one another, the world appears to have once again become *theatrum mundi*, a system of bodies that encounter one another through the contingency of the *personae* they play, one in which performance becomes the process whereby body-parts are able to relate to one another and form new wholes despite being kept at a distance from each other—something like the neurones that communicate with one another despite remaining separated by the theatrical space of the brain synapses. In this *theatron* of which theatre and performance art are only parts, bodies are reiterated and emerge anew every time a performer meets an audience, every time something or someone acts, plays, or functions for something or someone else that watches, witnesses, or is otherwise involved in an encounter. That was the case in Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, where chairs alternated between acting as obstacles to the moving body of the dancers and standing in as indexes for everybody who had once sat on them and then left.<sup>5</sup> It happened, too, with Chernobyl, a city that went from playing home to its inhabitants to signifying the darkest side of nuclear power. Or with Kira O'Reilly's *Stair Falling*, where the stairs that were known for little more than their ability to be walked up and down suddenly were seen playing the quiet confidante for a body with whom they exchanged their most intimate

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<sup>5</sup> For a reading of Bausch's *Café Müller*, see above, pp. 141–146.

features, step by step and very slowly. Or, as discussed at length above, with *Blue*, where ultramarine blue went from merely performing blueness to representing blindness, disease, death, void, or even Derek Jarman, the artist, himself.<sup>6</sup> Or, even still, with Heidegger's tool in its path from being a hammer that performs hammering to becoming ungraspable in its strange thingness. Or, finally, with Deleuze and Guattari's orchid, sophisticatedly playing wasp without ceasing to be orchid, or the wasp that suddenly became part of the orchid's reproductive system while never really having given up the waspness of its being.<sup>7</sup>

In this *theatron* to which both recognition and surprise belong, performance was opened up as simultaneously *technē* and *poiēsis*, enactment and revelation. It emerged as repetition and transformation, presence and mediation.

Performance, it was argued, is both communication and translation, information filtered out of noise within and beyond the confines of human cultural production —performance as the way in which all bodies, human and nonhuman, play themselves to one another whilst always holding something back like some bearer of divine secrets.<sup>8</sup>

In such an ecological context where the only thing all bodies appear to do is perform to one another, what methodologies are available for the scholar interested in somehow grasping those encounters? Can Performance Studies, a field already infamous for the perversity of its methods and objects of study, expand its “broad spectrum” in order to address the encounter between bodies beyond the old certainties of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’? What happens on the stages of the world once the human exits the scene? Can performance theory help us think that?

One of the questions that immediately follows the realisation that 1) performance is not limited to human cultural production, and 2) what is performed does not exhaust the bodies of the performers, is the question of how to highlight the theatrical space of all encounters and the inaccessible reality of the bodies involved in it. The solution for that problem, it was argued,

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<sup>6</sup> See above, Chapter Four, pp. 172–197.

<sup>7</sup> See above, pp. 229–232.

<sup>8</sup> See above, pp. 71–126.

could pass through the catalysis of what was called strange encounters. Bringing together Heidegger's thoughts on the origin of the 'work of art,' Graham Harman's "allure," and the "*Verfremdungseffekt*" Brecht aimed to convey with his epic theatre, strange encounters were defined as particular instances of performance in which the theatrical distance between a body and the role it plays is revealed, making the body appear as a stranger, inexhaustible by the contingency of its performances.

Strange encounters are also those same encounters that, as argued in Chapter Three, are facilitated by the conscious embrace of the long tradition of ekphrastic writing and of its performative nature. By taking up writing as performance and deliberately hyperbolising the metaphorical strategies through which bodies appear in and as 'world,' scholars could be able to highlight the performative nature of all encounters and, therefore, to evoke the strange reality of the bodies for which their writing stands, very much like the Heideggerian hammer that only becomes present once broken, or the computer that only announces the hidden core of its being once it crashes in overload. In doing so —no longer marked by the critical attitude that turned scientific knowledge into a function of an all-too-human observer position—scholars could align themselves with recent advancements in theoretical physics and philosophy of science where bodies have been posited as entities expanded in space-time and only partially accessible at any given instant, very much like a frame that is frozen and then extracted from a film.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, and in the same way that some physicists have rejected the claims that quantum mechanics supports social constructivism, arguing instead that quantum is nothing but realism, so could the use of performative writing defended in this dissertation no longer claim the subjective nature of all knowledge but, instead, become a legitimate way to bring-forth the strange reality of bodies beyond the contingency of their encounters with one another.

A particularly successful example of performative writing as a way of highlighting the strangeness of bodies can be found in Derek Jarman's *Blue*, not only because of the sophisticated way in which the artist used performative metaphors as tools for knowing more and knowing better, but also because of

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<sup>9</sup> For the reasons behind this claim see above, pp. 118–119, particularly note 228.

the particularly wide scope and fleeting nature of the reality he tried to tackle, HIV/AIDS. As it was argued in Chapter Four, *Blue* is a film that uses the performative power of metaphor to operate as metareality, as a quasi-philosophical reflection on the nature of the real and of one's knowledge of it. In that way, the film is rather successful in conveying in a really strong manner the paradoxes of the real that have been underlined by the argument of this dissertation: Firstly, that bodies, whichever their nature, are both enmeshed in and distant from one another. In other words, bodies are constantly affecting and being affected by one another while remaining ungraspable, strange, inexhaustible by each encounter. Secondly, and following from the first paradox, that the strangeness of bodies is, in fact, their reality and not a mere consequence of a limited and deficient human knowledge, for what deficient knowledge brings about is, instead, the false realism that suggests bodies can be exhausted by the ways they appear in the world. It is in that way that the metaphorical ultramarine blindness of *Blue* allows for a clearer vision, albeit one that is also, because of that, fuzzier—*Blue* as weird realism.<sup>10</sup>

What one can achieve by claiming that all encounters are performative because they enact worlds, and that sometimes performances break down and make otherwise familiar bodies become estranged, is a more expanded framework for thinking community in an ecological way, beyond the contingencies of recognition and identity politics. If performed roles are approached as being always ephemeral and unable to exhaust the being of a body; if all bodies, human and nonhuman, are addressed as ultimately foreign to one another, then lasting community formations need not to depart from a selection of the attributes granting bodies the right to belong but can start, instead, from the realisation that *communitas* can come about when bodies welcome one another as strangers. If performed appearances are, as it was argued, the result of processes of selection, filtration, and governance of bodies, and if bodies can

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'weird realism' is borrowed from Graham Harman. Writing in his book on H.P. Lovecraft, Harman noted the following:

"The title *Weird Realism* suggests that our plan is to work through Lovecraft towards a deeper conception of realism than is usual. Most philosophical realism is 'representational' in character. Such theories hold not only that there is a real world outside all human contact with it, but also that this reality can be mirrored adequately by the findings of the natural sciences or some other method of knowledge. [...However, no] reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it." Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Aldersford: Zero Books, 2012), 51.

become political, appear otherwise, and disturb the order of any systems of relations in which they take part, then communities could perhaps be built on the strangeness of all encounters rather than having their existence dependent on the recognition of patterns of class, gender, race, species, or of any other taxonomic qualifiers.

If humans accept that they are members of a universe-wide, borderless, community of strangers, then the ethical debates that will follow will have to concern themselves with how to best approach one's neighbours regardless of their nature as humans, animals, or 'things,' and no longer depend on judgements of whether a particular set of neighbours satisfies whichever conditions humans have found necessary for something or someone to be worthy of consideration. As a consequence, new forms of community where strangers are allowed to belong can fulfil the ecological needs from which this thesis departed, for they will take as their principles the tight enmeshment of human and nonhuman bodies and their ability to affect and be affected by one another, whilst never forgetting that all bodies are irreplaceable and inexhaustible by any of the roles they perform to one another.

Through the rediscovery or, at least, re-embrace of the ecosystemic nature of the real that the above entails, performance was given a broader than broad spectrum beyond the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide. What such a move aimed to achieve was the decoupling of performance from 'Culture,' allowing for the roles played by nonhumans in everyday encounters to become increasingly evident. Yet, in doing so, the thesis put forward here did not represent an attack on the work that Performance Studies has been doing since its inception as a discipline. Instead, its aim was to try to push even further one of the founding gestures of the field: the opening of performance theory to events taking place outside black boxes and white cubes. Such a gesture, in its willingness to think the parallels between what goes on inside a theatre and what takes place in wider social settings, can be said to have been the first attempt at understanding performance from an ecological viewpoint, a gesture that tried to look at the place of performance within the proverbial 'bigger picture.' Through placing itself in line with that field-defining move and its broadening of the spectrum of performance, this thesis aims to contribute to a project that started some fifty years ago with Richard Schecher and that was only made more

pertinent by the scale of the current ecological crisis and the uncertainties it has raised about the future of human and nonhuman collectives—a project that is, for all that matters, far from being over.

In doing so, there is an aspect of performance theory that this thesis has attempted to reconfigure, and that is the rejection of theatre that, as it was seen in Chapter Two, was central for the initial development of the field. Thus, and against the views that have often separated theatre as a place of artifice and repetition from performance as something ephemeral because contingent on the live encounter of bodies, this thesis has attempted to reunite the two back together. The way it has tried to do so was by stressing the theatrical cleavage between witnessing and performing bodies that is necessary for performance to take place, while simultaneously maintaining the ephemeral and contingent nature of all performative encounters in which *personae* are enacted to stand for bodies.

Through its broadening of performance onto the nonhuman field and stressing of the dependence of performance on *theatron*, this thesis has also opened up a wider ecological context that can frame the study of more ‘traditional’ or human instances of cultural performance. As it has hopefully been demonstrated by the Interlude dedicated to works by Art Orienté Objet and Pina Bausch, once artists and audiences become aware of the ways in which all bodies depend on performance for encountering one another, then black boxes and white cubes can be put in context and be used as wider ecological laboratories for the study of the myriad of ways in which strange bodies of all kinds encounter one another ‘out there’ in the world. As *Che Le Cheval Vive en Moi* and *Café Müller* have shown, once performance works are approached as ecosystems—as systems of relations between humans and nonhumans—bodies are able to emerge as deeply enmeshed strangers that oscillate between performing their expected roles and revealing their inaccessibility to one another.

For that reason, too, performance theory can become a very useful tool for making sense of the wider world in the Anthropocene, after the blurring of the divide between ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture.’ Because it ought not to be restricted to artistic, social, or even corporate spheres, performance can be a crucial

concept illuminating both existing and future works concerned with rethinking both the place of humans in the broader ecosphere, as well as imagining a future in which all bodies are cast equally as agents of the world.

From philosophy to ecology, from computer science to speculative physics, Performance Studies could help clarify the ways in which bodies interact with one another at both macro- and micro-levels of the real. As such, and in line with the promise of its broader than broad spectrum argued heretofore, perhaps the current ecological crisis does not so much mark the end of the world as it does signal the dawn of a new age, an age of performance.

—FUGUE—  
**Speaking in Tongues**

The West African priest summoned the sacred. From behind a sculpture carved out of wood, the sacred flickered and announced its unfathomable presence. The congregation started singing and dancing in awe and reverence while, a few miles away on the coast, an army of conquerors disembarked a flotilla of ships flagging the colours of 'civilisation.' Scared of the power wielded by the carved wooden fetish, Western priests, soldiers, and philosophers quickly took over the reins of knowledge and claimed the supremacy of the human and its immunity to the flickering presence of the nonhuman, to its inhuman attraction. Today, if nonhumans are to keep any kind of glimmer, their glimmer is that of the commodity; if they are to wield any power, their power is that of demanding consumption. In our societies, deprived as they are of shamanic rituals first by the autocracy of the church and then by the priesthood of reason, nonhuman bodies can only find their lost glimmer in the shopping jungle of our high streets or within the sweaty walls of fetish clubs, the last remaining temples where they are still allowed to glimmer beyond their givenness in experience, where, for instance, a pair of leather trousers is always so much more than what you will ever do with it—touch them, wear them, smell them, lick them, and still you will never be able to exhaust their being.

Nevertheless, and to the increasing despair of the lords of the land, nonhumans do sometimes still surprise us when we least expect it. Say, in this moment (right now) when I sit here reading the words on this sheet of paper. As I get on

with it, I know the paper only inasmuch as it works as a blank support for the words I'm reading (right here, right now). I can say, when asked what am I doing, that "I am reading this piece of paper." However, what I am in fact doing is reading the words printed on it (right here, right now). This is my current relation to this sheet of paper; this is metonymy: knowing this piece of paper through the words that are contiguous with it.

Another relation can follow the first one (however, only if I allow it): if, right here, right now, I am suddenly taken by a childlike curiosity and a scholarly devotion to knowledge, I cease to be satisfied with knowing this piece of paper simply through the words printed on this page and my eyes start wandering over it, attempting to probe its being—top, bottom, left, and right. All of a sudden, the black ink of these words becomes merely accidental to the being of the paper, it matters no more. I realise that other words could have been written right →here← and still the paper would have remained the same. I look beyond these accidental words and, with a smile on my face, I dive into the blankness of the page (right here → ←, right now). The paper becomes these 11.69 by 8.27 inches of whiteness and I feel reassured: I must be on to something. Still, there must be more—there is always something more—as I become aware of all the qualities of the paper I had hitherto not taken into account: its touch, its texture, its ability to be turned into a boat, a hat, or a paper plane; its capacity to be burnt by an unexpected fire or to soak up the water from a puddle into which it has been thrown and then quickly forgotten... I am drawn to accept the blank canvas I had previously thought this sheet of paper to be as just an instance of the innumerable metonymic relations I may come to establish with it, as one of the many roles it can play for me.

And yet, yet here I am (right here, right now), not having really grasped the true substance of this piece of paper and suddenly aware that I might never be able to do so. No matter how differently I may have approached it—with my eyes or with my hands, with my nose or with my ears, with my tongue or with my thought—this piece of paper kept on refusing to fully disclose itself to me. Like the black leather trousers I wear when the lights are dim and touch and smell replace sight, this piece of paper, like any other fetish, has proved to always be

more than what I will ever make of it and, in doing so, it has made me aware of the ultimate strangeness of its being.

A burning question now arises (and, quickly, I put my hands under cold running water to prevent any blisters): if I can never really access the hidden being of this piece of paper, if the closest I can get to it is by letting myself notice (and be obfuscated by) its glimmering aura, by becoming aware of its presence while still never really knowing it, then what is this thing we call knowing? How can I know something without ever being in direct contact with it, if my relation to it will always be tangential, metonymic? How can I summon the opposite margin of a river I won't ever be able to cross (because no engineering will ever be able to bridge the here and the there; because no matter how much you love something or someone, you will always be loving at a distance, all touch never really touching, all distance never really being walked—Zeno's paradox)? What is this world we live in, a world in which, no matter how enmeshed we are in one another, we are always far away from each other? What is the real if not a world of fourth walls, of walls that have never really been broken down, of walls that will always exist between the tips of our fingers or the edge of our noses, between the surface of our tongues or the retina of our eyes, between the membrane in our ears or the thoughts in our heads, and everything else that we touch, smell, taste, see, hear or think?

This is a world of theatrics, a world of performers and audiences, where every encounter happens at a distance, where communication is always both partial and noisy—the information being transmitted hitting bumps and holes, rubbing up against other messages and other bodies that refract it on its way from body to body, from performer to audience. The whole world is a *theatron*, a place for seeing, one in which communication often carries parasitic information, accidental data, feedback noise. On its rocky path from here to there, from body to *persona*, information becomes a contingent, incomplete, and provisional translation of a shy original, and it carries with it the traces of the innumerable obstacles it has encountered in the space between you and me. No window is ever fully clear, no telescope can ever look that far away, no performance can ever provide full access to the being of the performer, be it human, animal, or thing, material or abstract, dream or reality. No matter how devoted I am to this piece of paper, to the stuff of its paper-being; no matter how much strength and

dedication I expend in trying to know it, the only thing I will ever get from it is one of its masks, one of its *personae*, one of its characters, one of its performances: sometimes... sometimes it plays the surface for my writing, sometimes the raw material for my paper boat; sometimes it convinces me it is a letter, sometimes it reminds me it is nothing but evidence of a once living, once standing, once thriving tree. (Cue the army of forensic investigators.)

Understood in that way, performance implies the translation of an always coy body into an extroverted phenomenon, of idea into movement or sound, of matter into image, of environment into world. And stage after stage, performance after performance, I keep on chasing it, from tree to paper to letter to boat, trying hard to overcome the white blindness caused by the stage lights that follow me on my crusade. However, no matter how fast I run or how educated I am in the thespian arts, I can never reach the dressing room backstage where (in my dreams at least) bodies calmly remove their costume and clean up their make-up before lying there, naked, on the sofa by the lit mirror, waiting for me to come knocking on their door.

Having said that, you must never think bodies perform only for us. In the end, the show is open, free, and everyone and everything has been invited. (Advice: come early if you don't want to sit on the floor at the back of the room.) Imagine the black ink of these words, for instance. Even if, unlike me, it can access the paper's capacity to absorb liquids by, itself, being absorbed, it still can't experience its shade of white or its capacity to be turned into a paper plane. Or, to expand this scene slightly, imagine a tree being cut by an axe (it can, if you want, be the same tree that produced the cellulose for this sheet of paper—it's always good to keep things in the family, you know?). So the axe hits the trunk of the tree (once, twice). The tree trunk screams open with the impact of the blade. An axe-imprint, an image or a performance, is left on the inner surface of the trunk, now exposed to the atmosphere and bleeding dry at the mercy of the elements. Yet the tree grasps nothing of the axe but the shape and momentum of its blade; it has no access to its colour and is oblivious to the shape of the handle attached to it, to its temperature, texture, or even to the muscled arm of the hot lumberjack holding it. The axe hits again (and again, and again), expanding the surface of the cut, licking open the wound. The tree falls and becomes paper for this writing, canvas for these words. And still (and again),

while the ink penetrates the paper and slowly dries in the empty spaces amongst its cellulose fibres, it remains blind to the tree that the paper once was and to the particular shade of white it has in my eyes.

Now we are back at the beginning, just before I realised this piece of paper must be more than the words written on it, more than its blankness, more than its look, touch, taste, smell or sound; more than any thought I will ever have on it, more than any use I will ever give to it.

And so, both here with this piece of paper and out there where the trees keep on growing, the world has suddenly become a play in a theatre where the lights don't go out, one of those in which the cleavage between audience and performer, and between the latter and its role remains highlighted. That, however, is not due to the fact that the masks are too loose or the acting not up to scratch. It has only to do with a particular way of encountering, one that makes us aware of the absolute strangeness of all bodies beyond any masks, roles, or *personae* through which they make themselves appear to us. So don't be fooled, more than being about a specially crafted autonomous body on the stage or gallery wall waiting for you to see through it, estrangement is first and foremost about trying to reach beyond the contingency of images, characters, or roles, beyond givenness in experience; it is about glimpsing beyond the ordinary in search of the world's hidden surprises while nevertheless knowing that what lies beyond the reassuring certainties of the ordinary will always remain dark, silent, and ultimately inaccessible. And as such, it is as much about 'Art' as it is about 'Science,' as much about poetry on a page or paint on a canvas as it is about all other bodies, some big, some really small, some human, some not, some bright, some fragile, some dark, some strong, that we must remember to encounter everyday as strangers with which we share the world.

This, therefore, is neither a game of mastery nor a game to be won. This is a game about the rediscovered importance of playing, not about playing to accumulate victories. And it is happening everywhere: it is happening here, it is happening out there in theatres and gallery spaces, it is happening everywhere else where bodies, human and nonhuman, are able to get together despite still retaining their strangeness to one another: from the internet to the ozone layer,

from the mountains of Congo to the Palace of Westminster, from microwaves to dreams of better life, from libraries with books to read to squares where books have been burnt, from you and me, here, to the rusting metal of the benches outside. You just need to look around and consider your fellow strangers.

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