

**Theatre Without Actors**  
Rehearsing New Modes of Co-Presence

Pedro Manuel

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# **Theatre Without Actors** Rehearsing New Modes of Co-Presence

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# Introduction

## — The Emptied Space

### Theatre without Actors<sup>1</sup>

Since the turn of the century, an increasing number of theatre makers have created works without actors. In this dissertation, I analyse these works, situate them in a historical trajectory about theatre without actors, and consider the theoretical implications therein for the field of theatre and performance studies. I show how in these works the absencing of actors is not sought as an end in itself but instead is a consequence of strategies aimed at staging unrehearsed performers, technology, and natural phenomena. These strategies challenge the idea that a relation of co-presence between actors and spectators is a fundamental aspect of theatre and performance. They experiment with new ways for humans and non-humans to be co-present in the theatre.

A view of co-presence as a core characteristic of theatre is expressed, for example, by Peter Brook's claim: "A man walks across [...] [an] empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre" (Brook 1996, 7), or Erika Fischer-Lichte's view that "the minimum pre-conditions for theatre to be theatre are that person A represents X while S looks on" (Fischer-Lichte 1992, 7). However, this dissertation argues that this centrality of the co-presence of performer and audience should be understood as a historically contingent phenomenon. Moving beyond a binary view of co-presence allows us to rethink relations of co-presence between spectators and their surrounding realities, and between humans and non-humans. In this regard, the absencing of the actor is instrumental in rethinking notions that are relevant to the field of theatre, particularly, concerning views about "presence", "acting" and "spectating". The questioning of these notions could already be found in the work of scholars such as Elinor Fuchs, Philip

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<sup>1</sup> Etymologically, I use the word actor in its neutral form, to refer generally to a person "who acts", independent of its gender. For the definition of actor see, for example, Merriam-Webster's dictionary entry, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/actor>; for the issue of gendering the word "actor" see Steven Pritchard's article "The Readers' Editor on... Actor or Actress?" available at <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/sep/25/readers-editor-actor-or-actress>

Auslander, Roger Copeland, Béatrice Picon-Vallin and Hans-Thies Lehmann in the 1990's, even though they may not have made explicit reference to theatre without actors. And already since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre makers such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Edward Gordon Craig and Enrico Prampolini have experimented and argued for forms of theatre without actors.

Practices of theatre without actors are not an oddity, nor do they aim to undermine the practice of theatre. Rather, they could be seen as a consistent artistic development in the contemporary performing arts. Most of the stage works<sup>2</sup> I am referring to in this dissertation have been produced and/ or presented in the European professional field of the performing arts, and performed in theatre venues, festivals and site-specific locations. While these works have been created by professionals from the performing arts field, some also involved the acting of audiences and non-professional performers. It is my contention that due to the quantity of examples of theatre without actors since the early 2000's, the diversity of strategies deployed for creating works without actors, and the explicit references from the history of theatre, the subject of "theatre without actors" demands a closer look and analysis.

In this dissertation, I develop this aim in three chapters. Each chapter addresses the issue of theatre without actors from a distinct time frame. In the first chapter, I focus on presenting seven contemporary strategies of staging without actors illustrated with examples of performances. During my research, I investigated an extensive number of examples of contemporary stage works that dealt with the absence of performers. The chapter discusses a selection of these as examples of strategies of staging (without human performers or professional actors) that can be observed in contemporary theatre. These examples are grouped according to recurring artistic strategies. I discuss how these strategies allow new acting subjects<sup>3</sup> to surface, such as spectators, non-actors, machines, animals and natural phenomena. The selection demonstrates the diversity of strategies of staging without human performers or professional actors, and demonstrates how these strategies challenge assumptions

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<sup>2</sup> In this study I refer to theatre productions using three distinct terms: theatre "pieces", "performances" and "stage works". I do this because I find that using these different terms allows for openness in considering the range of artistic work presented. Accordingly, the main reason for not using the coinage of "play" is its traditional association with dramatic theatre — although the game-like aspect of "playing" would be a fitting description for many of the examples presented.

<sup>3</sup> By "acting subject" I intend to denote who or what is the agent acting in a theatrical environment. Accordingly, when using this denomination, I refer to human performers but also to non-human, such as animals, objects and natural phenomena.

about how actors and spectators are co-present in the theatre. Furthermore, through introducing these seven strategies, I show a recurring interest of artists in staging unrehearsed acting, real-life environments and natural phenomena.

In the second chapter, I introduce two sets of references that demonstrate how the absence of the actor is a development that is not exclusive to the contemporary performing arts but that it has been experimented and discussed in previous historical contexts. The two sets of references concern firstly examples of performances between the seventeenth and 19th centuries that can be seen as stage works without actors and that are introduced based on their strategies of staging; and, secondly, essays and articles written between the beginning of 19th century and the first quarter of 20th century that address the possibility of withdrawing the actor from stage. By engaging with these references, I demonstrate that the issue of absenting actors is woven into the development of modern theatre. Furthermore, I argue that while there are distinct differences between the diverse strategies where the actor is absent from stage, there are also recurring relations between these references and contemporary practices of theatre without actors, namely: in terms of strategies of staging, of alternative acting subjects, and of an interest in staging the materiality of real objects and of natural phenomena.

In the third chapter, I introduce and analyse discourses from the fields of theatre and performance studies of the 1990's that account for specific modifications occurring at the time in ways of thinking about theatre. The modifications I refer to include: how technology and the rise of media culture affect the perceiving of the presence of actors, liveness, and co-presence; how the consideration of theatricality in non-theatrical contexts envisions the possibility of withdrawing actors; and, how forms of connecting theatre and ecology open the way to forms of staging the real beyond actors. My position is that these specific modifications in thinking about theatre in the 1990's enable the possibility of thinking about the absenting of the actor and still to this day influence the orientation of contemporary theatre without actors.

Before moving to the first chapter, I detail several threads that are relevant to the development of my line of inquiry in the following sections of this introduction. I do this by presenting the trajectory that led me to choose theatre without actors as a research interest (in *Trajectories*) and then continue by substantiating my focus on the absence of the performer within the specific field of theatre (in *Why Theatre?*) and in relation to related artistic practices in the fields of the performing arts and visual arts (*Related Practices*). Furthermore, I introduce how the absenting of the actor

challenges a fundamental theatrical notion, that of co-presence (in *Co-Presence*). In the final section, I outline the structure of this dissertation, as well as introduce the main references, and then unfold my arguments concerning theatre without actors (in *Structure*).

### Trajectories

As a theatre maker and researcher educated between the end of the 1990's and the early 2000's in Lisbon, I was brought up under the assumption that actors were a fundamental aspect to define theatre. However, I gradually moved away from that assumption as I became interested in the rapid appropriation of technological developments into theatre, dance and performance, as well as in site-specific or community-based works, following a growing culture of participation. From the moment, I assumed to myself the possibility of absencing the performer from stage, and, in particular, that of the actor from theatre, this view unlocked an ability to recognise an array of diverse strategies of staging in the landscape of contemporary theatre. Furthermore, this view allowed the possibility to question the presence and agency of actors as being historically contingent practices, rather than as a given about theatre and as fundamental to its definition.

My first encounter with a performance without actors took place at Festival de Almada in 2003, where I attended the performance *Les Aveugles* (2002)<sup>4</sup> by Canadian director Denis Marleau. Following this experience, I came into contact with a variety of other performances without actors, for example *Coma Profundo* (2002)<sup>5</sup> by Visões Úteis, *Sand Table* (2005)<sup>6</sup> by Meg Stuart and Magali Desbazeille, *Here Whilst We Walk* (2006)<sup>7</sup> by Gustavo Ciríaco and Andrea Sonnberger, *Mnemopark* (2005)<sup>8</sup>, *Chácara*

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4 *Les Aveugles*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, directed by Denis Marleau, Avignon and Edinburgh Festivals, July and August, 2002

5 *Coma Profundo*, by Visões Úteis, directed by Ana Vitorino, Carlos Costa and Pedro Carreira, Foz Velha, Porto, October 11, 2002

6 *Sand Table*, by Magali Desbazeille and Meg Stuart, Le Fresnoy, Tourcoing, June 16, 2000

7 *Here Whilst We Walk*, Andrea Sonnberger and Gustavo Ciríaco, co-produced by Alkantara and Panorama festivals, Alkantara Festival, Lisbon, July, 2006

8 *Mnemopark – A Mini Train World*, by Stefan Kaegi — Rimini Protokoll, Theater Basel, July 1, 2005

*Paraíso* (2008)<sup>9</sup> by Rimini Protokoll, and *In Search of the Lost Revolution* (2008)<sup>10</sup> by Theater Ligna. Later on, and after moving to the Netherlands in 2009, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with the work of artists such as Dries Verhoeven, David Weber-Krebs, Kris Verdonck, Heiner Goebbels, Ant Hampton and Annie Dorsen.

The experience of being present in *Les Aveugles* resonated in particular within the trajectory that led to this research. *Les Aveugles* is a performance based on a play written by Maurice Maeterlinck in 1890, and Marleau staged it by recurring to a video projection of the faces of two actors over several masks, while these masks were cast from the faces of the actors in the video. At the time, I was impressed by the verisimilitude of this effect of human presence, even when nobody was present on stage. Moreover, the Festival's information sheet on *Les Aveugles* indicated that Marleau followed an idea by Maurice Maeterlinck concerning the replacement of human presence on stage with shadows or mannequins. Maeterlinck developed this idea in essay "Un Théâtre d'Androïdes" in 1890 (Maeterlinck 1890), and coming in contact with this text surprised me because it showed an explicit claim about absenting actors from stage. This idea was apparently forgotten but I found it very relevant to contemporary theatre and performance discourses.

Significantly, at the time, I started seeing connections between these performances and the essay-manifesto "The Theatre of Death" (Kantor 1993)<sup>11</sup> by Polish director Tadeusz Kantor. In this text, Kantor suggests an affiliation between German writer Heinrich von Kleist and British director Edward Gordon Craig around the idea of replacing actors with automated puppets. Furthermore, in this text, Kantor indicates that these authors are affiliated with the late-19th century art movement of Symbolism. After attending *Les Aveugles* I identified Kantor's reference to Symbolism as a reference to Maeterlinck's essay. I was struck not only by how Marleau's performance created an effect of presence through the use of video doubles, but also by how *Les Aveugles* could be considered in relation to Kantor's signal towards a history behind the idea of absenting the actor from stage. Consequently, it was this simultaneous contact with a performance without actors and a theoretical grounding of

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<sup>9</sup> *Chácara Paraíso*, by Stefan Kaegi and Lola Arias (Rimini Protocol), Alkantara Festival, Lisbon, May 23, 2008

<sup>10</sup> *In Search of the Lost Revolution / À Procura da Revolução Perdida*, by Theater Ligna, Lisbon, July 9, 2008

<sup>11</sup> Initially published in 1975 by Galeria Foksal PSP Books in Warsaw.

performances without actors that shaped the hypothesis of theatre without actors as a concrete research interest.

### Why Theatre?

The absencing of the professional performer or of human physical presence is not a phenomenon exclusive to the field of theatre. In fact, there are prolific examples of pieces without performers in the fields of dance, performance art and music<sup>12</sup>. In this regard, it matters that I acknowledge that, in this dissertation, I have chosen to investigate how such phenomena can be seen, particularly, in relation to theatre. The primary reasons that informed this choice are as follows: firstly, this is because contemporary theatre makers claim that their works without actors should be seen as theatre, or related to theatre; secondly, there are a wealth of relevant references to absencing the actor in the modern history of theatre since at least the 19th century;

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<sup>12</sup> Examples in the field of dance include Meg Stuart and Magali Desbaizeille's video experience in *Sand Table* (2000), the series of *Dancer — Dancer #1*, by Kris Verdonck, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, May 15, 2003; *Dancer #2*, by Kris Verdonck, Kaaithheater, Brussels, January 22, 2009; *Dancer #3*, by Kris Verdonck, Kaaistudio, Brussels, January 14, 2010 — the mechanical staging of *Sacre du Printemps / The Rite of Spring*, by Romeo Castellucci, Ruhrtriennale / Gebläsehalle Landschaftspark, Duisburg-Nord, August 15, 2014. Moreover, “conversation pieces” such as *This Progress*, by Tino Sehgal, ICA, London, February 2, 2006, reading experiences such as *We Are Still Watching*, by Ivana Müller, concept and text by Ivana Müller in collaboration with Andrea Bozic, David Weber-Krebs and Jonas Rutgeerts, Theatre Frascati, Amsterdam, November, 2012 and *Sync* by Emilie Gallier, Counter Punch!Punch! Festival, Amsterdam, October 13, 2012, or the tour in *Here Whist We Walk* (2006) by Gustavo Ciriaco and Andrea Sonnberger, the staging of a donkey and dancers in *Balthazar*, by David Weber-Krebs, Theaterschool, Amsterdam, March 31, 2011, finally the staging of non-professional dancers in *Disabled Theatre*, by Jérôme Bel, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, May 10, 2012. In the film industry, the absence of human acting has already become a mainstream practice, for example, through animation movies, as well as recent developments with CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) that allows for manipulation of previously recorded images of a deceased actor in order to have the actor performing in a new movie, see for example “Rogue One: The Resurrection of Peter Cushing in Thrilling — But Is It Right?” by Joseph Walsh, December 16, 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2016/dec/16/rogue-one-star-wars-cgi-resurrection-peter-cushing>. A similar strategy has been used recently in music concerts where the presence of a deceased musician (Tupac Shakur) was suggested by means of a hologram, see for example: “Tupac Coachella Hologram: Behind the Technology”, by Chenda Ngak, CBS News, November 9, 2012. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/tupac-coachella-hologram-behind-the-technology/>.

and finally, it is in my view that while other practices in the performing arts have also experimented with the absencing of the performer, viewing this phenomena from the field of theatre offers the opportunity to challenge assumptions around a definition of theatre as being based on the co-presence of actors and spectators. This opens up an engagement within the field around notions such as “presence”, “co-presence” and “agency” of humans and non-humans.

I show that the absencing of the actor is not an exceptional oddity or a recent tendency, but an idea that has been articulated before and that is relevant in the development of modern theatre. It is worth looking at the history of theatre during the 19th century and early 20th century from the perspective of the absencing of the actor, to find famous examples such as the well-known essays of Kleist, Maeterlinck and Gordon Craig on how mechanical bodies can potentially perform more accurately than humans. I also bring attention to lesser-known examples, such as Charles Lamb’s questioning of the fitness of the actor to enact fictional characters, or the works of Enrico Prampolini, Oskar Schlemmer and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, who put forth views of acting that are essentially scenographic and devoid of human presence. These texts are diverse with regard to their aims and contexts and, although they do not assert a homogeneous claim concerning the absencing actors from theatre, they allow for the reconstitution of a precedence — and continuity<sup>13</sup> — of the idea of absencing actors within theatre history.

Moreover, during my research, I became aware that contemporary stage works without performers were brought forward by a heterogeneous community of artists who, upon a closer look, appear to share common interests and formal strategies. One of such commonalities is their positioning of their works without performers in relation to theatre practices and theatre discourses. Theatre directors such as Denis Marleau, Kris Verdonck, Annie Dorsen, Ant Hampton, Heiner Goebbels, Romeo Castellucci, Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, or groups such as Rimini Protokoll, Theater Ligna or Gob Squad, have explicitly addressed the issue of absencing the physical presence, or the professional experience of actors. Significantly, these directors’ works have been included in theatre programs, in festivals and venues, supported by both state funding as well as theatrical institutions, and reviewed by critical discourse produced from within the field of theatre and performance studies.

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<sup>13</sup> This view is reinforced by the fact that those claims were often grounded in explicit lines of influence and dialogue with previous authors — one is able to discern a line of influence, for example, between Lamb, Maeterlinck, Craig and Schlemmer and Prampolini.

An example of this critical discourse is the diverse interviews and articles following the presentation of performances without actors by the theatre makers mentioned above. In this way, the issue of absenting the actor has surfaced in texts written, for example, by Yana Meerzon, Hélène Jacques, and Olivier Asselin, on the work of Marleau. The issue can also be found in the writings of Peter Eckersall, Catherine Bouko, and Kristof van Baarle on the work of Kris Verdonck. Although disperse, reflections on such stage works have produced relevant and diverse information on the absence of human performers and professional actors from within the field of the performing arts.

Although the specific issue of the absenting of the actor has not been the subject of an academic study so far, and has rarely been addressed in a direct way, a number of scholars have positively contributed to the development of discourses about the absenting of the actor. Examples of works that lay out theoretical grounds for the emergence of lines of argumentation regarding theatre without actors are abound. For instance, in the article “The Presence of Mediation”, Roger Copeland (1990) openly criticises the assumption of presence as essential to a definition of theatre, and envisions the possibility of surrogating human actors with three-dimensional holograms. In the book *L'Acteur en Effigie: Figures de L'Homme Artificiel Dans le Théâtre des Avant-Gardes Historiques*, Didier Plassard (1992) proposes the concept of “theatre of effigies” to address forms of theatre with artificial actants. In the article “Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, Amelia Jones (1997) proposes a view of the body on stage as always already mediated, which implies the need to rethink the notions of presence, agency and spectatorship. In “Hybridations Spatiales, Registres de Présence”, Beatrice Picon-Vallin (1998) discusses how the interaction between live actors and live video feed on stage implies different levels of presence on stage, and questions whether actors need to be present. Christopher Balme’s “Surrogate Stages: Theatre, Performance and the Challenge of New Media” (2009) departs from the late 19th century machine “theatrophone”, to reflect on the intersections between theatre studies and media studies beyond the performance of actors. In “Machinations Théâtrales”, Clarisse Bardiot (2009) departs from Marleau’s staging of *Les Aveugles*, to align a proposition for theatre without actors with intermedial performances of robots and automata. Recent PhD dissertations also touch on the subject. *Strange Encounters: Performance in the Anthropocene* (2014) by João Florêncio discusses the implications of thinking about performance without humans from a critical discourse that challenge a divide between nature and culture, whereas *Expanded Choreography: Shifting the Agency of Movement in The Artificial Nature Project and*

69 *Positions* (2016) by Mette Ingvartsen discusses the reconfiguration of the relation between humans and non-humans through an expanded account of choreography.

These different approaches show a diversity of perspectives on the subject of theatre without actors. As seen in the literature mentioned above, the absenting of the actor can be placed alongside approaches to marionettes, technology or media, as well as about post-humanist philosophies or choreography. Following this diversity of approaches, in the next part I engage with artistic practices related to the absenting of the actor that further contribute to the contextualisation the phenomenon and the perspective of the argument developed in this dissertation.

### **Related Practices**

Although I will be focusing on the impact of absenting the actor in theatre, it must be noted that practices of performing without performers are a phenomenon that can also be observed across other artistic practices, in theatre and beyond. In this regard, I would like to briefly account for three contemporary artistic practices of performing without human or professional performers, as well as with non-humans. The first, “object theatre” is affiliated with theatre while, in the others, “expanded choreography” and “installation art” the absence of the performer is articulated within the disciplinary fields of dance and visual arts respectively. In particular, I explore how these contemporary artistic practices can be seen to envisage forms of absenting the human and the professional performer. In doing so, I aim at further charting the horizon of associated references and refer to other artistic practices that are affiliated with theatre without actors. Considering this affiliation, I now briefly refer to the three artistic practices, and outline the connection I see between these practices and the absenting of the performer.

The first case of affiliation concerns practices of object theatre. The expression “object theatre” that I am proposing here refers to the French expression *theater d’object*, a form of theatre where the main aspects of acting concern the manipulation of objects<sup>14</sup>. Often, these objects are not created specially for a performance but

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<sup>14</sup> Sources referring to “object theatre” include companies such as Théâtre Cuisine, Vélo Théâtre, Turak, as well as authors such as Émilie Charlet, Aurélie Coulon and Anne-Sophie Noel, who edited the volume 4 of *Agôn – Revue des Arts de la Scène*, themed “L’Object” in 2011, available at <http://agon.ens-lyon.fr/index.php?id=1668>, as well as Justine Duval in the article “Le Parti Pris des

they are found objects, relocated to the theatre from the contexts of daily life (e.g. mass-produced objects) or of a specific practice (e.g. tools). Onstage, human performers manipulate these objects in order to portray fictional characters and stories, as well as to explore the possibilities of making the objects interact with each other. The ways objects are staged and enacted is not always anthropomorphic and, often, theatre makers tend to stage the object in ways that heighten their physical presence and their agency, beyond the presence of human performers. In this way, practices of “object theatre” can be considered as affiliated with theatre without actors in the sense that they privilege the staging of the physical presence of objects and of their interaction, beyond human presence and acting.

However, I have resisted to include “object theatre” as an example of theatre without actors because I found that there seems to be no reference to the absenting of human performers, or to the use of non-professional performers, nor to the staging of objects as a form of staging the real. Although object theatre stages objects and non-humans of everyday life, these are not staged as such, but are made to perform as fictional characters. In that sense, they do not fit the argument I am developing here concerning how theatre without actors entails forms of staging the real and modifications of co-presence between what is staged and the audience.

The second case of affiliation concerns how the term “expanded choreography” has been recently applied to choreographic creation beyond the discipline of dance. More specifically, expanded choreography has been described as a practice<sup>15</sup> that looks to expand concrete aspects of choreography, such as movement, space, or the human performer, in ways that exceed the disciplinary practices and discourses of dance. By considering the choreographing of movement beyond human movement, or of performing beyond human performers, practices of expanded choreography

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Choses” (2012) available at <http://www.lintermede.com/theatre-objet-marionnettes-isabelle-bertola-paris-cuisine-manarf-analyse-critique-interview-piece.php>, and Daniel Durchon in “Le Theatre des Objects”, *Les Mercredis de La Comédie* (La Comédie de Reims: Reims, 2001), available at [http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-reims/fileadmin/documents/preac/spectacle\\_vivant\\_comedie/Dossiers\\_thematiques\\_realises\\_de\\_1999\\_a\\_2004/theatredobjets.pdf](http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-reims/fileadmin/documents/preac/spectacle_vivant_comedie/Dossiers_thematiques_realises_de_1999_a_2004/theatredobjets.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Sources referring to expanded choreography include choreographers such as Xavier Le Roy, Marten Spangberg or Mette Ingvartsen — who also wrote a PhD dissertation entitled *Expanded Choreography* (2016) — as well as literature such as Elena Basteri, et al. (eds.) in *Rehearsing Collectivity: Choreography Beyond Dance* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2012), Antje Hildebrandt, in “The End of Choreography”, *Choreographic Practices*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2016), or Bojana Cvejic, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in Contemporary Dance and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

create ways of staging non-human actants and ways of rethinking the role of the professional performer. In this regard, expanded views about choreography beyond dance relate with the way the absencing of the actor expands views about acting beyond theatre.

The third case of affiliation concerns practices of “installation art”. Although practices of “installation art” are commonly seen as being part of the field of visual arts, there are a number of intersections between those and theatre, namely, notions of scenography, theatricality, liveness and spectatorship<sup>16</sup>. With respect to theatre without actors, cases of performances where there is no physical presence of human beings may elicit a reading of the absence of the actor as a signal that the performance is, instead, a piece of installation art. This is, for example, the case of Marleau’s *Les Aveugles* (2002): entirely made of automated video-projections, without the physical presence of performers, presented continuously to a small group of spectators, this performance seems to fit a presentation format which is more similar to an installation art piece than to a theatre work. In this way, the relation between installation

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<sup>16</sup> It matters to refer that, from 1960’s onwards, it is possible to locate a number of works that entail performative action devoid of performers within practices of conceptual art, invisible art, action and performance art. Examples can be found in works such as Robert Morris’ performing of an object in *Column*, 1962 (Tuchman, 2017); instructional art pieces such as Yoko Ono’s *Instruction Paintings* at the AG Gallery in New York, in 1962 (see for example: “Instruction Pieces” in Yoko Ono. <http://www.a-i-u.net/yokosays.html>; participatory experiments such as Dan Graham’s *Performer/Audience/Mirror* at the Apple Arts Centre in Amsterdam, in 1977 (see for example: “Performance/Audience/Mirror, Lisson Gallery, London”. ASFF. August 5, 2016. <http://www.asff.co.uk/performance-audience-mirror-lisson/>) or, later, in *Forest Walk*, by Janet Cardiff, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canadian Artist in Residence Program, 1999 or Tony Oursler’s video installations with dummies such as *Judy* and *Get Away* at Kunstlerhaus in Salzburg in 1994 (see for example: “Kunstlerhaus Salzburg | Salzburger Kunstverein, Kenstlerhaus, Hellbrunner StraBe 3 | Salzburg, 5020 | Austria, Mar. 1 - Apr. 1, 1994”. by Tony Oursler. <http://tonyoursler.com/judy>). It is also worth mentioning the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in the Centres Georges Pompidou in 1985, where one of the rooms was called “Theatre of the non-bodies” (*Théâtre du non-corps*) and where the visitor would find five boxes with dioramas of stage settings without actors, created by Jean-Claude Fall and Gérard Didier departing from Beckett’s theatre (see for example: “Les Immatériaux”. [https://monoskop.org/Les\\_Immat%C3%Agriaux](https://monoskop.org/Les_Immat%C3%Agriaux)). Academic sources referring to the intersecting of installation art and performance — and how the presence of bodies are therein questioned — are, for example Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood”, *Artforum* Vol. 5 (1967), Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), Claire Bishop, *Installation Art, a Critical History* (London: Routledge, 2005), or Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

art and theatre without actors is not established on the modifications brought by absenting the performer but, instead, established on the level of how the absence of the performer modifies the conventional set up of theatrical presentations.-

Artistic practices such as “object theatre”, “expanded choreography”, and “installation art” exemplify ways of rethinking human presence and co-presence beyond performers, and in this way, widen the range of references engaging with contemporary theatre without actors. However, although I acknowledge the interconnectedness of these artistic practices, I situate my approach in relation to theatre because it allows me to research the absenting of the performer in relation to a particular set of references from theatre studies and theatre history, such as notions of presence, acting, character, marionette, scenography, liveness, and co-presence, to name a few. Furthermore, such absenting of the performer will also be seen in relation to the field of theatre in two ways: by addressing the absence of the physical presence of the actor, as well as by the absenting of actors’ skilled professional expertise. This means that I refer not only to works without any humans present, but also to works performed by humans, accounting for two aspects of the being of actors: as physically present acting bodies, as well as trained and experienced professionals. In this way, within the subject of theatre without actors I develop a specific view, namely, how the absenting of the actor determines new arrangements of co-presence among humans, and between humans and non-humans. Following this approach, I exemplify in the following section how the absenting of the actor challenges the constitution of co-presence between actors and audience.

### Co-Presence

The terms “actors” and “theatre” appear to be so intertwined that it seems impossible to break them apart without canceling out each term’s particular meaning. One of the notions that has contributed to the deep-rootedness of this association is co-presence. The term refers to a relation established between human actors and spectators, being co-present during a performance, in a co-extensive space and on a simultaneous time. Although in a strict sense, this notion addresses the relations established between beings in a given context, who are co-present, being with each others, co-presence has been discussed within theatre studies as an essential and defining characteristic of theatre, by (among others) directors Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, and scholars Peggy Phelan and Erika Fischer-Lichte. According to these

authors, the notion is fundamental to the definition of theatre in exclusionary terms, that is, it has become a way to define what is distinctive about theatre in regards to other artistic disciplines.

A minimalistic account of co-presence can be found in Brook's opening lines of his book *The Empty Space* (1968) also quoted above in the first section of this introductory chapter. Brook writes: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." (Brook 1996, 7) Brook's statement has been often referenced as a statement that establishes the relation of co-presence between actors and spectators as essential to the definition of theatre. However, theatre without actors disputes that such arrangement of co-presence, between actors and spectators, is the only possible form of co-presence in theatre and performance. An immediate way in which the absence of actors challenges such an essentialist account of co-presence is that there is no "man" walking across a space, for "someone" to engage with in a relation of co-presence. The absencing of the actor interrupts the relation established exclusively between human actors and spectators, as well as the dualisms embedded in such an account of co-presence. These dualisms include actor vs. spectator, active actor vs. passive spectator, fictional time vs. real time, and stage vs. audience. Rather, from the perspective of pieces without actors, a relation of co-presence is multiple, and establishes modes of being co-present with a multiplicity of human and non-human entities. Considering Brooks' example of the empty space as a space devoid of everything except of the actor and of the spectator, one can think of how the absencing of the actor does not cancel a relation of co-presence but, instead, enables the audience to perceive the space emptied of the actor as a performing space.

This was the perspective developed by German director Heiner Goebbels in a lecture entitled "Aesthetics of Absence" (2010), reflecting on how a theatrical space emptied of actors can be seen, in fact, to be inhabited by a realm of other "matters". In this lecture, Goebbels develops his view of a "theatre of absence"<sup>17</sup>, where theatre

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<sup>17</sup> Goebbels employs the expression "aesthetics of absence" by departing from Elinor Fuch, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) as he himself indicates: "The absence here is to be found on other levels as well: as a refusal of any dramatic action, for example. I think "little seems to happen," said Ryan Platt in his introduction to a screening of the film version of *Black on White* at Cornell two weeks ago. [...] Presence is doubly reduced in *Black on White* by the rather amateurish "non-presence" of the musicians, who never did anything similar before. You can observe the un-expressive, un-dramatic, but highly concentrated faces of the

is re-thought according to the “absence of a story”, or the “absence of a visually centralized focus”, or “a division of presence among all elements involved” or “the disappearance of the actor / performer from the center of attention (or even from the stage altogether)” (Goebbels 2010, 12). Considering in particular his performance *Stifters Dinge* (2007)<sup>18</sup>, which will be further introduced in “Chapter 1”, Goebbels reflects on how the absence of actors creates an emptied space that allows spectators to discover things on stage by themselves, rather than through the acting of performers.

The experiment we tried with *Stifters Dinge* (a piece without a performer) was this: Will the spectator’s attention endure long enough if one of the essential assumptions of theatre is neglected: the presence of an actor? [...] When nobody is on stage to assume the responsibility of presenting and representing, when nothing is being shown, then the spectators must discover things themselves. The audience’s sense of discovery is finally enabled by the absence of the performers, who usually do the art of demonstrating and binding the audience’s vision to them by attracting total attention. Only their absence creates the void in which this freedom and pleasure are possible. [...] And they (audience) often let me know with relief: “finally nobody on stage to tell me what to think.” (Goebbels 2010, 14-18)

To Goebbels, actors bind the “audience’s vision” and concentrate their “total attention”. They have “the responsibility of presenting and representing” through their “art of demonstrating”, telling the audience “what to think”. Accordingly, if there are no actors on stage, the attention of the audience can be distributed across different things. When actors are no longer “showing or demonstrating”, the audience becomes free to “discover things [by] themselves”, perceiving what subsists/persists beyond the presence of actors: which, in the case of *Stifters Dinge*, were mechanisms, objects, light, sound, and natural phenomena. However, to what extent has the audience been liberated? Who, or what, holds now the “responsibility of presenting and representing” and managing the audience’s attention? When actors are absent, what

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performers, who do not pretend to be anyone other than themselves as musicians in that very space and moment while we watch them. Often turning their backs towards the audience and dividing the attention of the audience across the landscape of eighteen simultaneously active persons. To cite Elinor Fuchs again: “A theatre of Absence ... disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilizes meaning”. (Goebbels 2010, 6-7)

<sup>18</sup> *Stifters Dinge / Stifter’s Things*, by Heiner Goebbels, Théâtre Vidy, Lausanne, September 13, 2007

makes a space or an action continue to be perceived as theatrical? How can a relation of co-presence be established between audiences and other kinds of human and non-human performers, beyond actors?

In “Chapter 1”, I discuss a diversity of strategies that engage with these questions by looking into different kinds of acting subjects in forms of staging without actors, such as spectators and non-actors, animals, technology, and natural phenomena. I show how each strategy develops an approach to co-presence that modifies the way a theatrical space is perceived, and the way someone or something is seen to be acting in that space. This will bring me to the conclusion that the absence of the actor does not cancel relations of co-presence in theatre but that it reformulates the conditions in which this relation has been commonly thought of and performed. The absence of the human performer and of the professional actor in the contemporary performing arts necessitates a rethinking of co-presence beyond an account of co-presence defined by an exclusionary and binary relation between actors and spectators. In this dissertation, I argue that theatre without actors exemplifies the rehearsing of such renewed modes of being co-present, namely, between human actors and spectators, between humans and non-humans, and between living and non-living entities.

### **Structure**

As mentioned above, this dissertation is composed of three chapters, each referencing a different period in time, with its particular set of references. Together, they propose a consideration of contemporary theatre without actors as a consistent development within theatre history and, within this context, the absencing of the actor as a means to explore new configurations of co-presence between human and non-human performers and audiences.

In “Chapter 1 – Strategies of Contemporary Theatre Without Actors”, I introduce seven strategies of staging of contemporary<sup>19</sup> theatre and performance without actors that, together, represent a diversity of means of performing beyond the presence and acting of humans and actors. Each strategy is subsequently supported by examples of contemporary performances where there are no professional actors nor human performers, presented mostly on stages throughout Western Europe in

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<sup>19</sup> In this dissertation, the period of time that I refer to as “contemporary” corresponds tentatively to the period from the year 2000 until now.

the last fifteen years. The seven strategies, illustrated by twenty-three performances, are assembled in three sections: “Artificial Beings”, where I consider the staging of technology without the presence of physical human actors; “Environments of Play” where I observe participatory performances that are enacted by spectators; and “Making Appear the Apparent”, where I consider the staging of natural phenomena and of the spectatorial gaze without the physical presence of human actors.

In “Chapter 2 – Views About Absenting the Actor in Theatre History”, my line of inquiry is directed at evidencing how the idea of absence of actors has been experimented and discussed in the past, particularly between the early 19th and early 20th centuries. This demonstrates that the idea is intertwined with the development of modern theatre, rather than a recent and isolated phenomenon. This chapter is divided into two main sections: in the first, “Brief Account of Strategies of Performing Beyond Actors Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, I introduce a number of performances presented between the seventeenth and 19th centuries that, in my view, show commonalities with contemporary theatre without actors, such as in their staging of mechanisms or of natural phenomena, and the replacement of human performers or professional actors; in the second, “Historical Views on Absenting Actors”, I show how the absence of the actor was envisioned and discussed between the early 19th and early 20th centuries, by introducing a number of essays by theatre makers engaging with that possibility and their proposals for alternative strategies of staging.

The section concerning a “Brief Account of Strategies of Performing Beyond Actors Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries” is divided according to three strategies of staging. The strategy of “Staging Mechanical Bodies” examines the anthropomorphism of mechanical automata to consider how their performance conjured human presence while surrogating it. The second strategy of “Staging Mechanical Phenomena” considers how mechanical devices were used to create visual spectacles that performed “on their own”, that is, without human performers on stage, as in examples of machine-plays and performances of optical illusions. The third strategy of “Staging Natural Phenomena” looks into how the interest in demonstrating scientific developments led to performances where the main interest was the staging of natural phenomena — even if human performers were required to assist the performance.

In the second section of “Chapter 2”, “Historical Views on Absenting Actors”, I introduce and discuss essays and articles by Kleist, Lamb, Maeterlinck, Gordon Craig, Schlemmer, Prampolini and Moholy-Nagy. This section is further divided in

three parts. In the first, “Inadequacy of the Actor”, I highlight how these author’s texts express criticism towards the presence and acting of actors, and how they suggest the possibility of dissociating theatrical acting from actors. In the second, “Lack of Life”, I review how their texts propose strategies for staging theatre without actors, through anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic surrogates. Finally, in the third part, “Natures of Theatre”, I consider how these texts elaborate on the need to withdraw human actors in order to define theatre as an autonomous artistic discipline.

Finally, in the third chapter of this dissertation, “Framing the Emergence of Theatre Without Actors Within Theatre and Performance Studies”, I show how discourses from the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies in the 1990’s and early 2000’s unlock ways of thinking that set the stage for the emergence of theatre without actors in subsequent years. The chapter is composed of two main parts: in the first, “Challenging Notions of Mediated Presence”, I start by engaging with discourses that analyse the co-presence of actors and audiences as an unmediated relation and as an essential aspect to define theatre and performance. This could be found in particular through writings by Phelan and by Fischer-Lichte. Then, in “Discourses Forwarding Notions of Mediated Presence” I introduce three kinds of discourses that expand ways of thinking about theatre beyond an essentialist account of co-presence as un-mediated. First, I examine how forms of staging technologies impact on how we perceive the acting of actors, the liveness of a performance, and the performativity of documentation. Secondly, I look into how thinking about theatricality in non-theatrical situations led to changes in ways of thinking about the spectatorial gaze as the locus of theatre, and about theatrical acting by non-humans. Thirdly, I consider how discourses addressing the relation between theatre and nature reflected upon concepts such as “landscape play” or “theatre of perceptibility”, fostering practices of ecological theatre and forms of staging the real. In each of the three kinds of discourses I underline how they contribute to the thinking about the absenting of the actor and entail a review of co-presence beyond a dualist account.

These three chapters are followed by a “Conclusion”. In this part, I start by revisiting how the main argumentative steps taken in each chapter unfolded. Furthermore, I elaborate on an aspect concerned with contemporary theatre without actors that I identify as a possible direction of developing the subject beyond the field of theatre. This aspect studies the theoretical affinities between discourses on theatre without actors and discourses of post-humanism, by focusing on how performances without actors rehearse an expanded co-presence in theatre beyond binary dualisms, and

how they bridge human and non-human agencies.

In this way, this dissertation makes a contribution primarily to the theoretical framework of theatre and performance studies, through providing a historical review of early modern and post-modern theatre. A substantial part of my line of reasoning addresses contemporary theatre without actors as a diversity of forms of theatre aiming to stage reality both with humans and non-humans, and rehearse artistic, philosophical and ecological positionings. In this regard, this dissertation situates itself secondarily in alignment with discourses that exceed theatre and performance studies and engage with views on exchanging agency with the realm of the non-human, and rethinking the presence of humans in their environments, in an expanded, networked and implicated way.

# Chapter 1

## — Strategies of Contemporary Theatre

### Without Actors

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the phenomenon of theatre without actors as it is manifested in the early twenty-first century. During this period, a wide variety of performances are made and performed without actors. In some of these performances, audiences participate autonomously by following instructions. In others, people who are not professionally trained as actors perform, their own personal lives taken up as reference. In another sub-set of performances, non-humans are the only agents performing, as in the cases of works staging the performance of animals, or technology and machines. Certain works stage the occurrence of natural phenomena, and intervene in the way we observe and perceive where we are and what surrounds us.

This chapter presents an overview of different strategies of staging that can be distinguished in theatre without actors. Concretely, it introduces seven different strategies, each illustrated by several examples of performances. The seven strategies are divided in three sections. In each I consider how they are employed to stage different acting “agents”, namely, “Technology”, “Spectators” and “Matter and Gaze”.

The purpose of assembling these strategies is to draw attention to the artistic choices characteristic of contemporary performances without actors, charting recurring practices and offering an account of the means and materials employed. This allows me to show how a closer look at these different strategies illuminates relationships between what, at first sight, seem to be very different cases. The seven strategies that I distinguish here are:

- “Doubles”: where video recordings of actors are projected in ways that suggest they are physically present on stage;
- “Autonomous Machines”: performances where the theatrical action is embodied and performed almost exclusively by machines and technological devices;
- “Aural Scores”: where spectators with headphones participate in performances

by following instructions given through pre-recorded audio tracks or radio;

- “Readership”: where audiences participate in a performance by reading a script, alone or together;

- “Non-Actors”: where spectators and volunteers act on stage unprepared or unaware of parts of what their role entails;

- “Natural Phenomena”: where natural phenomena are shown within the contained limits of a theatre, such as when animals are staged to perform autonomously;

- “Staging Sightseeing”: where audiences roam and are invited to observe the same public spaces and landscapes they are in;

These strategies are not sharply delineated categories. They overlap and, sometimes, performances can combine elements of several strategies. My overview in terms of these seven different strategies is not meant to fix performances into a structure but, rather, to draw attention to relationships that can be observed in-between the structural aspects of these different strategies of staging, particularly those concerning the absence of human performers and professional actors. I show that a closer look at these structural aspects, as well as the aims and ideas of makers, helps to generate an understanding of how theatre without actors reconfigures a relation of co-presence in theatre beyond the human actors and spectators, implicating non-human and non-living agents in interrelated forms of co-presence

In this way, the aim of the chapter is to introduce this material in order to research how such strategies challenge assumptions regarding theatrical presence and agency, and how they constitute new forms of devising theatrical co-presence between human audiences and non-humans. Initially, I am not referring to examples of performances as being exclusively theatre but also seen as choreographies, music concerts or interdisciplinary pieces. However, the examples are instrumental in showing how strategies of absenting human performers and professional actors challenge concepts from theatre, and can be critically reflected upon when seen through the prism of theatre concepts. Although these works are not seen as a homogeneous field of practices, I consider them as challenges to certain aspects of the role of the theatre actor, particularly its professional agency and its physical presence. In this way, the variety of strategies allows for the association of the absenting of the actor in contemporary theatre with the consideration of new acting subjects, and with the experimentation of unforeseen relations of co-presence between stage and audience.

## **Section 1 — Artificial Beings: Technology**

In the strategies presented in this section, different ways of staging machines constitute strategies for creating theatre without actors. In particular, the acting or performance of machines and automata become the main focus of interest, and human presence is recast through technological media. This part introduces two strategies: “Doubles”, exemplified by performances where video projections conjure the physical presence of actors; and “Autonomous Machines”, a strategy demonstrated through fully automated settings.

Strategies of “Doubles” and of “Autonomous Machines” are exemplified by performances where objects and technology are automated, and performed without the presence of human living performers. In this regard, they are mainly constituted by the technological programming of automated devices, rather than by a rehearsed human performance. In these “automated performances” human presence is reduced to the role of technical assistance during a performance. Objects, machines and technological installations do not act as counterparts to human performers, but constitute the sole presence on stage.

### **Strategy 1 — Doubles**

In the following, I refer to a kind of automated performances where the physical presence of actors is replaced by audio-visual technological installations. I discuss performances by two contemporary theatre makers, Denis Marleau and Kris Verdonck, that exemplify this strategy. In this strategy, video images are set to fit a predetermined projection surface and, given a distance between the audience and these surfaces on stage, an illusion of an actor’s physical presence is created. In this way, the strategy is to create a sense of physical presence of absent actors — while also implying a sort of re-enactment of a past performance (and thus absence). In the examples of this strategy, given that the physical absence of the actor is re-enacted through a presentation of the actor’s image, I refer to these images as *doubles*<sup>20</sup>,

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<sup>20</sup> In my use of “doubles” to refer to video-based enactments of human actors, I am openly building on Steve Dixon’s formulation of “doubles” (Dixon, 2004) — which contrasts with the use of the notion by Antonin Artaud in his book *Le Théâtre et Son Double* (Artaud, 1938). Digital doubles refer to digital copies or data of a performers’ body that interact with living performers as documents or by

referring to how the setting of projected images physically double the presence of absent actors.

Denis Marleau: *Les Aveugles*

In his staging of Maeterlinck's drama *Les Aveugles* (2002), Marleau projected video recordings of the faces of two actors — one female, one male — on to several masks that were cast from each actor's face. The effect, reinforced by the dim lighting and a distance from the audience, created the illusion of the physical presence of actors. The faces of actors were projected onto a set of twelve masks, which constituted the sole element visible on stage: twelve projections of faces illuminated an otherwise black scenario and drew full attention to the actors' expressions, the text performed by these projections and the soundscape.

Written by Maurice Maeterlinck (Maeterlinck, 2010), *Les Aveugles* (in English *The Blind*) tells the story of a group of blind people who go for a walk in a forest accompanied by a guide. Waking up from an afternoon nap, they realise that their guide has died during sleep and find themselves lost in the woods. Unable to find their way home, the blind struggle to distinguish their surroundings, for example, whether a distant rumble is the sea or thunder, or if it is midnight or midday. In Marleau's *Les Aveugles*, the audience looks at the fixed faces of the blind while they describe their still perceptive journey, by creating not only a visual experience, but also a suggestive experience of hearing and of remembering.

In the final moments of the performance of *Les Aveugles*, the lights brightened to the point where the masks revealed the surface upon which the faces were projected<sup>21</sup>, and the materiality of the masks as objects became the sole presence, inviting the

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being responsive. See for example: Steven Dixon in "The Digital Double", in *New Visions in Performance. The Impact of Digital Technologies* (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2004) pp. 13-30

21 In *Les Aveugles*, the act of making masks from the faces of the actors was also particularly significant, as it constituted the making of a very specific kind of indexical trace of the body of the actors: a cast. Used as mold to produce life-like replicas of the faces of the actors, i.e. masks of their own faces, the cast was also a kind of "contact print" and a "negative" of the actor's presence. In this sense, while the video images projected were iconic of a past performance, the masks were an indexical inscription of presence of the actors on stage, and not a random surface of projection. Reminiscent of the casting of funerary masks, the use of the masks aimed at a conjuring of the actor's physical presence through installing its material indexes. Regarding the use and manipulation of indexical traces in art see for example Liza Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

audience to fully realise the artificiality of the piece they had just been watching. During the performance, there were already hints to this, with aspects that countered the illusion of physical human presence. For example, a clear dis-illusionary aspect was the fact that there were six heads with the same female face and six heads with the same male face, indicative of copies. In fact, the program available in the beginning of the performance already mentioned that the faces of two actors were multiplied in many masks. Furthermore, during the performance, another dis-illusionary aspect was perceivable in the projected video images that carried a pixelated texture. For instance, the image became distorted when the moving mouths of the video were projected over the closed and immobile mouths of the masks. However, in the final moments of the performance, when the masks were seen devoid of their projected animations, there was a strong feeling to their concrete presence, similar to that of looking at marionettes when they are laid to rest after a performance — returned to their state of inanimate, disjointed matter. Similar to this lack of energy sensed in the bodies of resting marionettes' and their fixed open eyes, the masks of *Les Aveugles* also appeared shut, empty, and devoid of soul. The resting masks provided a canvas for the projection of audience's memories, to flicker through them and to project faces onto these heads as after-images.

Marleau's staging of *Les Aveugles* was part of a cycle called *Fantasmagories Technologiques*, which also included the staging of *Comédie* (2004)<sup>22</sup> by Samuel Beckett and *Dors Mon Petit Enfant* (2004)<sup>23</sup> by Jon Fosse. In *Les Aveugles*, the faces of actors were projected over suspended masks in the darkness of the set, while in *Comédie* and *Dors Mon Petit Enfant* the faces of actors were projected onto the "heads" of inanimate bodies: funeral vases in Becket's *Comédie*, and onto the heads of small sized puppets in *Dors Mon Petit Enfant*. The three performances included in this cycle share in common Marleau's exploration of the technique of projecting pre-recorded videos of actors' faces over masks<sup>24</sup>.

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22 *Comédie*, by Samuel Beckett, directed by Denis Marleau, Lille Capitale Culturelle, 2004

23 *Dors Mon Petit Enfant* by Jon Fosse, directed by Denis Marleau, Lille Capitale Culturelle, 2004

24 Marleau had previously experimented this technological setting in *Les Trois Derniers Jours de Fernando Pessoa*, by Antonio Tabucchi, projecting a video recording of the face of one actor over his own head with a mask, in order to portray the diverse heteronymous of Pessoa. This piece was adapted and directed by Denis Marleau, Salle du Paris St-Jean du Théâtre National Dijon Bourgogne, Dijon, April 24, 1997.

What is particularly distinctive in Marleau's *Fantasmagories* is how he purposefully aligned his use of "video masks"<sup>25</sup> to reconstitute the presence of actors and, furthermore, based this artistic choice upon references from theatre history. For example, in *Les Aveugles*, Marleau engages with Maeterlinck's claim, in "Un Théâtre d'Androïdes" (Maeterlinck 1880), about replacing the living human actor by inanimate beings such as mannequins, shadows and puppets. In *Comédie*, Marleau engages with Beckett's intentions of constraining human acting to minimal presence, by having faces speaking text while their bodies were immobile and invisible inside funeral vases. In this way, Marleau's *Fantasmagories Technologiques* are an early example of a piece without actors recurring exclusively to a strategy of video mask with the intent of challenging assumptions about the presence and absence of actors.

Kris Verdonck: *Huminid*, *They*, and *M, a Reflection*.

Within his pieces *Huminid* (2010)<sup>26</sup>, *They* (2010)<sup>27</sup> and *M, a Reflection* (2012)<sup>28</sup> Flemish artist Kris Verdonck takes on a similar strategy to that of Marleau in his re-enactment of human presence on stage, by exploring video projection. However, Verdonck introduces an important variation as he employs the strategy of projecting videos of whole bodies of actors, rather than only faces. In Verdonck's performances named above, a video recording of the full bodies of still and standing performers

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<sup>25</sup> It matters to remark that Marleau's technique of projecting faces of actors over a human head-shaped surface, was not pioneered in *Les Aveugles* but, earlier, by French artist Zaven Paré, who experimented with this technique in *The Theatre of Ears* by Valère Novarina, directed and designed by Zaven Paré, co-directed, adapted and translated by Allen S. Weiss, 2000 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre, New York, September 13, 2000 — as well as in *Colloque de Chiens* by Miguel de Cervantes, adapted by Zaven Paré, design and video conception by Zaven Paré, Institut International de la Marionnette, Charleville Mézières, 2003. Paré refers to this performance as a kind of "theatre of erasure", or "theatre of ventriloquists", having further coined this video projection technique as "video mask technology" (Paré 2012, 51) Paré uses these expressions because, in his view, the silent mute marionette is simultaneously animated by the human voice but, as the voice is detached from the body, it leads to a fading of the presence of the actor. In this regard, the "video mask technology" works as a strategy to surrogate physically present actors with their documented images and voices.

<sup>26</sup> *Huminid*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaistudio's, Brussels, January 14, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> *They*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Theater der Welt, Essen, July 14, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> *M, a Reflection*, by Heiner Müller, directed by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Gent, September 25, 2012.

are projected on the surface of small-sized cut-out mannequins. The result is that “The projected image [is] seemingly three dimensional, exceptionally sharp and completely life-like” (Eckersall 2012, 73).

In *They*, this strategy was used to present a brief performance by three opera singers. Here, the video image of the full body of each singer was projected onto a cutout mannequin that reduced the size of the singer’s body to uncanny proportions. Furthermore, these three cutouts were plainly visible, demonstrating the technique that supports the effect of presence through video projection.

In *Huminid* this strategy was employed to stage an actor’s performance of Beckett’s prose piece *Lessness* (Beckett 1970). Here, the impression of the physical presence of the actor was facilitated by the fact that the surface of projection was not noticeable, given that the figure of the actor appeared at a certain distance from the audience and in a darkened “black box” theatre. In this case, the reduced human body of *Huminid* summoned the alchemic figure of the *Homunculus*, a mythological creature born to life by artificial means — as in *Faust* by Goethe (Goethe 1990), or *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (Shelley 2014). In the words of dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven, who worked with Verdonck, the aim of doubling the presence of the actor was to create “a creature [that] can be called part human and part doll: halfway between human and thing, halfway between life and death. Is it a human that wants to become a doll/thing or rather the reverse?” (Verdonck)

Finally, in *M, a Reflection*, the doubling of a real and digital actor became the main “effect” of the performance, given that the actor and his video projection performed simultaneously on stage. In this work, Verdonck staged an interaction between an actor — Johan Leysen, the same actor who performed in *Huminid* — and his projected image, and did so in a way that aimed at making indistinguishable which of the two actors was physically present onstage. This undecidability regarding who was who (the physically present actor or the virtual double) demonstrated that video doubles could be perceived as presences on stage, and showed that a digital recording of an actor could be perceived as having as much stage presence as his/her physical counterpart.

In the case of examples using video “doubles”, the medial apparatuses create illusions of un-mediated human presences. In fact, the illusion of human presence not only absorbs the role of the actor but it also distracts from the fact that there are a number of mediations at work. In the example of Verdonck’s performances with doubles, the appearance of the actors’ bodies was enhanced by a symbiotic interaction between video projection and the surfaces upon which these videos were

projected. This created a verisimilitude that modified the perception of bodies on stage, inviting the audience to see them, not as what they were — still, blank and mute objects, or moving images at the end of a beam of light — but as physically present actors, who were performing live. In particular, *M, a Reflection* dwells in the grey area of verisimilitude, resemblance and indistinctiveness, as the digital actor appeared to be physically present and the real actor was enveloped in the devising of mediated presence. In this case, the presence of both the referent and its sign are offered on the same ontological level, that is, they are both seen as being simultaneously real and virtual, attempting to create the illusion of presence<sup>29</sup> for both. In the performances with video doubles, the illusion of human physical presence was produced by the specific way in which the videos were installed, as well as by the illusion of disappearance of the medium itself. As Catherine Bouko remarks about *Huminid*,

This hologram [in *Huminid*] produces a particularly powerful presence effect: Bertrand Gervais (6-7) emphasizes, first, that this effect creates the illusion that the object or person is present on the scene independently of digital mediation: the ontology of the living actor's flesh and the mediatized actor tend to merge. Secondly, it creates an illusion of singularity, giving the impression to the viewer that the event of the presence is unique and fragile, ready to disappear at any moment, [...] The "presence" obtained by holograms tends to make forget the device that allows its appearance.<sup>30</sup> (Bouko 2011, 103)

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<sup>29</sup> This illusion of resemblance is determinant, for instance, in the creation of actroids (Eckersall 2017), human-like robots developed to perform a number of functions from assisting elderly people to acting in a theatre. The development of human resemblance in anthropomorphic robots is addressed by the notion of "uncanny valley" by Masahiro Mori, which aims at describing levels of empathy or repulsion in perceiving human semblance in inanimate beings. (Mori 2012) According to Mori, humans experience an increase of empathy towards a robot as it becomes more human-like. However, Mori also notes how this empathy is interrupted at a certain point during this progression, when the human resemblance of robots is felt as uncanny, leading to feelings of repulsion.

<sup>30</sup> Translated from original French version by the author: "Cet hologramme produit un effet de présence particulièrement puissant : Bertrand Gervais (6-7) souligne combien, premièrement, cet effet génère l'illusion selon laquelle l'objet ou le personnage est présent sur la scène indépendamment de toute médiation numérique ; l'ontologie de l'acteur de chair et l'acteur médiatisé tendent à se confondre. Deuxièmement, il crée une illusion de singularité, donnant l'impression au spectateur que l'événement de la présence est unique et fragile, prêt à disparaître à tout instant, [...] La « présence » obtenue par hologrammes tend à faire oublier le dispositif qui permet son apparition." (Bouko 2011, 103)

Bouko indicates that the “powerful presence effect” of the digital figure relates with the “invisibility” of “the device that allows its appearance”. In this way, the illusion offers the impression of being in the physical presence of a human but beyond this aspect, it primarily delivers the impression of immediate presence, that is, of an unmediated relation between actors and spectators. In these performances, the forging of the illusion of presence is part of the strategy of creating technological doubles of actors who are absent from stage.

Verdonck’s *Huminid* shows that video doubles challenge the relation of co-presence between actors and audience because, in pieces using this technique, the presence of actors can be perceived as physically present, regardless of their physical presence. Furthermore, these performances also appear to re-establish a conventional relation of co-presence between actors and spectators by creating a sense of immediate presence of actors. However, they do so through technological and mediatised means. Verdonck’s doubles demonstrate a duality in this strategy given that, on the one hand, absent actors are made present through their digital doubling while, on the other, the digital doubles are also perceived as beings acting beyond their documental source. In this way, these performances with video doubles demonstrate one way by which automated performances without actors generate a sense of autonomy, as the life-like human presence of the doubles appears autonomous.

### Strategy 2 — Autonomous Machines

This strategy concerns the staging of technology in ways that it performs autonomously from the presence or acting of humans and it does not attempt at simulating their physical presence. In the following, this strategy is demonstrated through examples of fully automated performances where there are no actors, or where the role of humans is circumscribed to facilitating or operating an automatism. I select four performances that exemplify this strategy: *Hello Hi There* (2010)<sup>31</sup>, by Annie Dorsen, *33 rpm and a few seconds* (2013)<sup>32</sup> by Rabih Mroué

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<sup>31</sup> *Hello Hi There*, by Annie Dorsen, Steirischer Herbst, Graz: September 24, 2010

<sup>32</sup> *33rpm and a Few Seconds*, by Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, September 28, 2012

and Lina Saneh, followed by *Stifters Dinge* (2007) by Heiner Goebbels, and, finally, *Sacre du Printemps* (2014) by Romeo Castellucci.

Annie Dorsen: *Hello Hi There*

In *Hello Hi There*, director and writer Annie Dorsen stages a dialogue between two chatbots<sup>33</sup>, installed in two computers. The text of this conversation is projected on a large screen and read out loud by a computer's automated voice as it is being written on screen. The chatbots employed in Dorsen's performance can generate over 80 million distinct conversational combinations by using a database of content that is randomly reconfigured by the software's algorithms. In *Hello Hi There*, each chatbot was programmed into a different computer that replied to each other on stage. In this way, these two computers emulated the presence of two distinct bodies, but also two distinct characters speaking to each other.

The setting of the performance is that of the simulation of a "natural" landscape with the computers installed upon an assumedly artificial green hill. In her performance, Dorsen deviates from the original purpose of a chatbot's dialoging with a human, by using the device on itself by staging a dialogue exclusively between chatbots that nonetheless maintain a conversational human tone. Ironically, in creating this quasi-human dialogue, Dorsen was inspired by the debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault in 1971 on the subject of "human nature"<sup>34</sup>.

By contrasting aspects about being human, the impression of nature or the absurd delirium of machinery, Dorsen invites a reading of her performance as one where mechanical motion can be seen as a manifestation of natural phenomena. Computers are not seen as means of representing dialogue, but as speakers themselves, as acting subjects. In this way, machines perform a kind of theatrical

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<sup>33</sup> A chatbot is a conversational software developed to aid the interaction between humans and computers — for instance, in the customer service areas of commercial websites or to access directories on smartphones. See for example: Chatbots.org. "Chatbot". <https://www.chatbots.org/chatbot/>

<sup>34</sup> This debate was organised and broadcast by a Dutch television channel in 1971. The full video of the debate is available, "Debate Noam Chomsky & Michel Foucault – On Human Nature" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wfNl2LoGf8>

acting devoid of human affection<sup>35</sup> through programmed but unexpected and unrehearsed motion. Considering these qualities, this mechanical motion became the manifestation of a kind of natural phenomena.

Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh: *33 rpm and a few seconds*

At a first glance, the set of *33 rpm and a few seconds* by Lebanese theatre makers Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh looked like a living room, with its large carpet and a table both stacked and surrounded by books, cables and electrical appliances arranged as in a living place, that included TV on the floor, a vinyl record player, a telephone, an answering machine and an open laptop on the table. However, this living room setting was disturbed by the existence of a vertical blank screen situated behind the table and imposing itself over this otherwise realist scenario.

The vertical screen displayed a Facebook profile page, that of Diyaa Yamout, an artist and political militant, who is the fictional protagonist of the performance. Diyaa's Facebook wall showed posts of friends asking for his whereabouts. The sound of voice messages left on answering machine following unanswered phone calls, allowed the audience to start realising that the character of

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<sup>35</sup> The theme of mechanical motion as a movement unaffected by human will has been approached before in the history of performing arts. The idea can be found to have influenced, for example, different accounts about life-sized human automata as performers such as those by Edward Gordon Craig (Craig, 1956) or Heinrich von Kleist who, in the short-story "On Marionette Theatre" (Kleist, 1972), reflects on how a mechanical life-size dancing automata would move in more accordance to nature than an human dancer, subject to gravity, imprecision and volition. According to Kleist, a mechanical body would be unbounded by human will, affections and bodily constraints, allowing to expand the range of possibilities of movement and moving exclusively according to mechanical motion — this essay will be further introduced and analysed in "Chapter 2". A view of mechanical motion as natural phenomena was also present in the way the human body was used in scientific experiments which were performed publicly in the eighteenth and 19th centuries, such as demonstrations of electrical conduction, where the body of participants would serve as conductor to electricity, and persisted in the idea of 'randomness' developed by avant-garde movements such as Futurism and Dada. See for instance, Lazlo-Moholy Nagy's kinetic sculpture *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, first presented in Paris, 1930, the choreographies of shapes and colour by Oskar Schlemmer, such as *Triadisches Ballett* — Oscar Schlemmer, Bauhaus, Stuttgart, 1922, as well as the mechanical stylisation of bodies in the acting technique of *Biomechanics* by Vsevolod Meyerhold; see for example: Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Biomechanics: Theatre". <https://www.britannica.com/art/biomechanics-theatre>.

Diyaa Yamout was missing, perhaps even dead, and to gradually predict that most likely, no one would appear onstage.

Thus, within this “living room” setting created by Mroué and Saneh, machines were actually the only elements in motion, bringing about an immediate manifestation of the potential of media and mediation that suggest interpersonal communication and human presence. The script of *33 rpm* unfolds the narrative of the disappearance of a fictional character, however in doing so, there is a dramaturgical step taken from staging the disappearance of the character and towards the disappearance of the actor. In an interview, Mroué reflects about the absence of performers in *33 rpm*:

We wanted to deal with the physical presence on stage, so we thought let’s try to do this piece without actors at all. This was not an easy decision for both of us, since both of us are actors. We thought at the beginning, let’s at least be present on stage as technicians. But then we thought, why, it is a compromise. (Mroué cited by Pearson)

Mroué and Saneh’s decision to withdraw the presence of actors from stage allowed for the character’s disappearance to become even more felt, particularly through the use of medial devices. The whole story was performed through the “displaying” of machines, which underlined the absence of the fictional character through documentation. In dealing with issues of digital life and death, the performance narrated the disappearance of a character by conjuring a “trace” of human presence, by employing strategies promoting a mediated self. Paradoxically, this absenting of the physical body of a character not only stressed a human absence, but also highlighted the concrete presence of the different medial devices in their materiality as objects.

#### Heiner Goebbels: *Stifters Dinge*

In 2007, German director Heiner Goebbels composed and directed *Stifters Dinge* by departing from texts by Austrian writer, poet and painter Adalbert Stifter<sup>36</sup>. *Stifters Dinge* — in English, “The Things of Stifter” — may be initially perceived as an art installation, with a setting composed of five open pianos, a diversity of scattered objects, the exposed entrails of machinery and natural elements, all inhabiting

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, a website dedicated to Adalbert Stifter’s life and work: “Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868)”, <http://www.adalbertstifter.at>

a constructivist landscape. However, this contained environment of natural and fabricated things inhabits a theatre and is presented as a performance and concert.

The set of *Stifters Dinge* was designed to work as a combined and “organic” whole, where the interventions of human assistants onstage were constrained to a supportive role. During the performance, mechanical and automated actions trigger a diverse soundscape by playing music and pre-recorded texts read by actors, and mostly by generating a series of moments in which natural elements — such as water, smoke and tree branches — interact with the machinery. Goebbels aimed at creating a performance engaged with “theatre as a ‘thing in itself’, not as a representation or a medium to make statements about reality” (Goebbels 2010, 5). In this way, Goebbels sought to create a piece where “the performers are replaced by non-anthropomorphic machines and objects, elements such as curtains, water, fog, rain, and ice — and by acousmatic voices” (*ibid.*, 15). Accordingly, the reach of such replacement is only achieved, in Goebbels’ view, by devising means for things to perform in the absence of actors.

Significantly, in this setting, the presence of fabricated objects such as pianos and moving screens, or of natural elements such as water and trees, is not supporting the acting of actors nor working as an accessory to the dramatic plot. Rather, objects themselves are staged in order to become the protagonists of theatrical acting. In *Stifters Dinge*, “things” are staged in a way that allow for them to be perceived in their concrete materiality, rather than as a backdrop set or a utilitarian prop. Objects and natural elements are not staged as a means to symbolise and demonstrate, but rather in the literalness of their “objecthood”.

#### Romeo Castellucci: *Sacre du Printemps*

*Sacre du Printemps* by Romeo Castellucci constitutes another example of a performance where the design of a fully automated set creates a performance that runs almost entirely by itself, and without the presence of live human actors on stage. *Sacre du Printemps* is an acclaimed choreographic and orchestral work that premiered in 1913<sup>37</sup> and, at the time, was surrounded by scandals given the innovations in the dance and music scores. In Castellucci’s staging of *Sacre du Printemps*, only the (pre-recorded) music of this piece remains. There are no humans dancing, but

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<sup>37</sup> *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, May 29, 1913.

instead streams of animal bone dust are sprinkled into the air and onto the ground by several robots fastened to a heightened structure over a contained space, while the audience attends the performance behind a glass panel situated on one of the sides of the space.

In his staging of *Sacre du Printemps*, Castellucci sought to present the automated, precise machinery of robots as well as the porous and diffused materiality of bone meal dust instead of the living, professional body of dancers. Bone meal is produced in industries related with animal products, such as slaughterhouses, and used as a fertiliser or as a dietary supplement. Within the dramaturgy of the piece, the reference to this cycle of production and of consumption fulfils the idea of sacrifice referenced in the piece's title, providing a funerary imagery to the absencing of the living.

Another significant material aspect at play in Castellucci's *Sacre du Printemps* are the robots. In moving frenetically from side to side, aligned, sequenced, in solo or in chorus, the robots spread the bone dust over the stage, and it is in the flickering instant in which dust falls that dancing shapes and shadows are created. The automated precision of these robots is attractive in its choreography, but these programmed robots can be perhaps considered as a reminder of an industrial agency: on the one hand, in the way of moving inanimate remains of bodies with technical precision, while, on the other hand, the replacement of human labour by mechanical means.

Castellucci's staging is also indicative of a relevant aspect in mechanical performances, that is the ability to devise an apparatus that runs autonomously beyond the acting of actors. By apparatus I wish to refer here not to the setting of one machine on stage, but to a combination of machines installed to perform autonomously as main performance in a theatrical context. In this way, the pieces of Dorsen, Mroué, Goebbels and Castellucci draw attention to the fact that, in pieces without actors, these apparatuses are not supporting the performance of actors but, instead, become acting entities. However, in these makers' views, this focus on mechanisms and on their autonomous performing does not determine a moving away from theatre. In the following, I introduce remarks by each of these makers concerning how they see their works without actors as challenges to disciplinary issues of theatre. These issues include the physical presence of actors, the staging of non-actors and the relation of co-presence with audiences. Even though the makers wish to challenge these issues, they at the same time defend that their works should be seen as theatre.

### Conclusion: Disciplinary Challenges

In the following, I depart from remarks by Mroué, Goebbels, Castellucci and Dorsen which explicitly discuss how their performances without actors relate with the field of theatre. Upon these remarks, I then raise how the absenting of the actor challenges disciplinary aspects of theatre, and how such specific approach can in turn illuminate the aims of absenting the actor in contemporary performing arts. The remarks of Mroué, Goebbels, Castellucci and Dorsen begin to outline some of the implications of thinking about the absence of performers in contemporary theatre.

Mroué indicates the importance of considering the absenting of the performer in his piece within the spectatorship of theatre, rather than of other art forms, and in dialogue with theatre history. Goebbels suggests that the absence of the performer opens an unattended space where new relations of perception can be established between spectators and things. Castellucci points out how a relation of co-presence may still be tenable in theatre, and also that such relation is not necessarily established between a human actor and a human spectator. Finally, Dorsen urges for a radical rethinking of theatre in light of the possibility of staging non-humans beyond the presence of human performers.

In an interview with writer Joseph Pearson, Mroué reflects on how the absence of actors in *33 rpm* and *a Few Seconds* does not imply that the piece should be viewed as something else than theatre.

“Isn’t this an installation?” I press him.

Rabih is very charming, and laughs like he’s heard this question before. He says, “It is something we have had to defend and insist upon, that this is a theatre work, and not just an installation. If it’s an installation, then we can do it in a gallery or a museum or an art center. But it needs to be done in a theatre because it needs a theatre-going audience, and our questions are on the history of theatre. It is questioning theatre, not the visual arts—let’s say, the tableau, or the painting—but rather the theatre form. Although we had a lot of invitations to do it in arts centers and museums, we always refuse, because this is a theatre piece”. (Mroué cited by Pearson)

In his answer, Mroué locates his definition of theatre between the sole decision of the maker and the contextual placement of his performance in the field of the performing arts. His observation regarding how the performance’s placement changes

the way it is perceived denotes an awareness concerning the construction of spectatorship in each of these contexts, and how the spectatorial gaze is organised differently in a gallery from a theatre. Mroué clearly states that he wishes this specific performance to be seen within the disciplinary context of theatre and in dialogue with theatre history. A similar concern in engaging with theatrical aspects lies also in the remarks of Goebbels when considering *Stifters Dinge*, “a performance with no performers and a concert with no musicians” (Dorment, 2008), where Goebbels aimed for “a theatre of absence”. He explains:

In traditional theatre, [...] subjects in the audience recognize themselves in the actor or singer or dancer on stage; [...] Instead of offering self-confirmation to both a performing and a perceiving subject, a “theatre of absence” might be able [to] offer an artistic experience [...] that does not necessarily have to lie in a direct encounter (with the actor), but in an experience through alterity. [...] Absence as the presence of the other. (Goebbels 2010, 16)

As a consequence, Goebbels’ work challenges the conditions of co-presence characteristic of the conventional theatre, given that the performance aimed at altering the very relation of “self-confirmation to both a performing and a perceiving subject”. In the introduction to this study, I quoted Goebbels to refer to how, in his view, the absence of actors generates the opportunity of an emptied space where it becomes possible to reconfigure a relation of co-presence between the audience and what is to be seen in/by the theatre. Here, Goebbels takes a step further and builds on this idea by pointing out that, in removing the actor, one is also removing the experience of being in a “direct encounter (with the actor)”. Thus he aims to shape an experience where an audience, rather than recognizing itself “in the actor or singer or dancer on stage”, experiences “the presence of the other”. In this sense, in *Stifters Dinge*, the automation of the performance worked as a formal strategy that compensated the void left open by the absenting of the actor, while it could also be seen as a strategy that reinforced the presence of things towards an audience of “perceiving subjects”. In this regard, Goebbels’ piece was, foremost, thought of by its maker as a perceptive experience, where the absence of actors allowed for a more direct encounter with the materiality of things onstage.

For Castellucci, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, again, offered a perceptive experience but in his view, it did not alter the fundamental relation of co-presence between audience and stage. Accordingly, the absence of actors was not viewed as problematic:

[Jean-Louis Perrier] – Can theatre exist without human presence?

[Romeo Castellucci] – I think so.

[J-LP] – Do you think it means the end of man?

[RC] – I do not think so, because even if there is dust, this dust represents the actor. The actor and the spectator are the two minimal elements, the frame through which theatre happens. Even if the actor is not of flesh and bone, even if he has transformed into dust, or geometric shapes, or animals, it remains the Actor with capital A. What we cannot change at all, it is the presence of the spectator.<sup>38</sup> (Castellucci cited by Perrier 2014)

For Castellucci, a relation of co-presence endures when “the actor and the spectator are the two minimal elements [...] through which theatre happens”. However, Castellucci clearly indicates that, for him, an actor does not necessarily imply the presence of physical human body. Instead, an actor can be “transformed into dust, or geometric shapes, or animals”. In his view, the function of acting — with “capital A” — as a defining characteristic of the actor, can be attributed to other beings and things as long as the spectator remains present. In this way, Castellucci envisions that a relation of co-presence is still evoked by the presence of the spectator, but can be reconfigured in a manner in which spectators relate to other non-human beings and things. This was also the case of the (almost) open-ended conversation between chatbots in *Hello Hi There*, through which Dorsen envisioned a radical rethinking of fundamental categories of theatre:

I began thinking about a theatre without human actors, in which that time-worn mirror becomes a glossy screen onto which human audiences project themselves, mediated by data, algorithms and interfaces. [...] Our engagement with those processes could become an opportunity to re-think the categories that define theatre: the presence of the body, the organization and operation of time, the use of language as a carrier for thought. (Dorsen 2012, 1)

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<sup>38</sup> Translated from original French version by the author: “[Jean-Louis Perrier] Le théâtre peut-il exister sans présence humaine ? / [Romeo Castellucci] Je pense que oui. / [J-LP] – Souhaitez-vous signifier la fin de l’homme ? / [RC] – Je ne crois pas, parce que même s’il y a de la poussière, cette poussière représente l’acteur. L’acteur et le spectateur sont les deux éléments minimaux, le cadre à travers lequel le théâtre advient. Même si l’acteur n’est pas en chair et en os, même s’il est transformé en poussière, ou en formes géométriques, ou en animaux, il reste l’Acteur avec un A majuscule. Ce qu’on ne peut pas changer du tout, c’est la présence du spectateur.” (Perrier 2014).

Dorsen reflects on the possibility of absencing human actors as a point from which to question a range of issues that are embedded into the discourses of the performing arts and, particularly, of theatre. Dorsen refers to *Hello Hi There* as “algorithmic theatre”, in the sense that it is generated by algorithms that “produce thought, they make decisions, they act. Thus, algorithmic theatre should be understood as theatre, and not as ‘theatrical installation’ or as any other coinage that allows me to [...] escape the constraints of my own discipline.” (Dorsen 2012, 02). Dorsen’s view is important because it proposes to acknowledge non-human and unrehearsed beings as performers. Furthermore, in specifying that her performance is a theatrical performance and must be seen as theatre, Dorsen invites a questioning of assumptions regarding the physical presence of actors and the relation of co-presence with the audience beyond the disciplinary “constraints” of theatre.

The reflections of Mroué, Goebbels, Castellucci and Dorsen show their interest in thinking beyond forms of theatre with actors, and also how this does not mean a negation or a leaving behind of the theatre, but rather the raising of new possibilities for making and understanding theatre. Furthermore, their remarks are interesting and relevant to the subject of this thesis for how they demonstrate that strategies of creating theatre without actors are not about the absence of actors per se. Instead, their observations suggest that the absence of performers is the result of how their work explores the possibilities of the medium of theatre, the possibilities of non-humans to act, and the possibility of new modes of co-presence. Theatre persists as a reference, and as a potential for transformation beyond how theatre is conventionally understood.

By focusing in viewing the absence of human and professional performers from the specific field of theatre, I wish to highlight how the absencing of actors triggers relevant questions to the field of theatre. In doing so, I do not wish to argue that the absence of performers in the contemporary performing arts must be seen exclusively through the lens of theatre but that there are specific notions and historical examples from this field that become challenged once we consider the absence of performers.

Two of these particular effects concern notions of acting and about co-presence: given that there are no actors, who or what acts instead of human and professional actors? And furthermore, what kind of new mode of acting is performed? In the following sections, “Environments of Play: Staging Spectators” and “Making Appear the Apparent: Staging Matter and Gaze”, I pursue these lines of inquiry by addressing strategies where, namely, non-professional performers act within theatrical

settings, or where natural phenomena is staged beyond the physical presence of human performers, two approaches determining renewed ways of being co-present.

## **Section 2 – Environments of Play: Spectators**

In this part, I look at two strategies of audience participation where the interaction with the audience is primarily based on instructions. These strategies are illustrated by two types of instruction-based performances without actors that place the spectator in the role of an autonomous participant/performer, namely: “Aural Scores” where spectators are instructed through listening and “Readership”, where spectators are instructed through reading. I refer to the examples of these performances as “autonomous participatory performances”.

Within this study, a score of instructions is used as an expression referring to a set of directions that instruct the audience on how to participate and what to do within the context of a performance. Within autonomous participatory performances, when looking at instructions as a strategy for absenting the actor, it is important to underline the significance of scores. In a sense, scores of instructions can be thought of as the stage directions that would remain if a dramatic play had been stripped of dialogues<sup>39</sup>. In dramatic literature, such stage directions contemplate often short and practical indications that describe the fictional setting of the plot, the scenography of the performance, the use of a prop or a nuancing of the ways of acting. However, when considering autonomous participatory performances, these indications gain the character of instructions for the audience because their function is to trigger and direct the enacting of audience participation in a precise manner, and set the atmosphere of play. In this way, in autonomous participatory performances, instructions become the very matrix from which participation is devised because they become the means for theatre makers to delegate the acting to spectators, as well as allowing spectators to act and experience autonomously.

By following instructions, audiences act autonomously in immersive envi-

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<sup>39</sup> Plays “without words” such as, for example, *Act Without Words* by Samuel Beckett, Royal Court Theatre, April 3, 1957 or *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* by Peter Handke, directed by Claus Peymann, Vienna Burgtheater, May 11, 1992 come to mind, considering that, in the absence of text to be said by actors, the play is described by stage directions and, in this regard, these plays can be regarded as scores of instructions.

ronments of play. This kind of participatory strategies create self-sufficient settings where spectators act individually, on their own, sometimes even independently from a larger audience group. This autonomy of the spectator implies two aspects I would like to highlight: on the one hand, a participatory setting that can “run by itself”, employing a degree of automatism that becomes a key element in creating an “autonomy” of audiences; on the other hand, the autonomy in participation facilitates spectators having individual perceptive experiences of the surroundings where participation is enacted as, for instance, in the real-life environment of public spaces.

### Strategy 3: Aural Scores

In the following, I consider a strategy for staging without actors that entails a score of instructions given through a sound-based “script” — which I denominate as “aural score”. Moreover, strategies involving “aural scores” tend to create the experience of an aural immersion that interferes with/transforms the perception of the space surrounding spectators. I introduce two performances to exemplify this strategy: *Etiquette* (2007)<sup>40</sup> by Rotozaza and *In Search of the Lost Revolution* (2008) by Theater Ligna.

The technology used in aural participatory performances often includes portable MP3 players and radio devices, that facilitate two aspects worth mentioning here: a dislocation of the performance space, which moves beyond the theatrical space and into public and private space; as well as the possibility of addressing each spectator individually — even when every spectator hears the same score. Such particular form of address allows for the creation of individual immersive experiences, which are created through soundscapes. These can be pre-recorded but also produced and broadcasted live as I show below. In this way, a private, immersed listening experience creates a new mode of inter-active spectating, rather than a collective act of listening in a theatre. From here, instructions are a practicality, but also a fundamental step in shifting from the role of the spectator as a part of the audience and as a listener, towards a view of the audience as agent, a surrogate of the actor, and assuring the self-sufficiency of the autonomous performative device.

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<sup>40</sup> *Etiquette*, by Rotozaza, written by Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali, original version funded by Arts Council England, Shunt Lounge, London, 2007.

### Rotozaza: *Etiquette*

An example of an autonomous participatory performance based on a score is *Etiquette* created by Rotozaza (Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali) in 2007. In this performance, Hampton and Mercuriali randomly paired two spectators at a time, and asked them to sit, facing each other around a table in a café. Both spectators were handed headphones and a MP3 player with recorded sound tracks, instructing spectators to perform simple tasks, for themselves or to the other. Hampton describes that the starting point for *Etiquette* “was conversation; we figured that when couples get together in a cafe, there’s always someone speaking and the other listening — actor and audience.” (Hampton, 2010). From a technical point of view, the performance was designed to be self-sufficient and portable, and therefore relieved from relying on human intervention in order to take place. The devising of a controlled setting and of an autonomous interaction between spectators by the theatre-makers, allowed for the performance to progress entirely by itself, that is, through the agency of the spectators who became the sole performers. Substantially, in *Etiquette*, the strategy of using a very strict score of instructions, managed by participants alone, created conditions for the performance to be based on the autonomy of spectators, rather than of actors.

### Theater Ligna: *In Search of the Lost Revolution*

*In Search of the Lost Revolution* was a performance created in Lisbon by German group Theater Ligna in 2008. In this piece, Theater Ligna used a live radio transmission to instruct participants who listened to their broadcast through headphones. Theatre Ligna describes this technique as “Radio Ballet” (Theater Ligna), a term used to name their works based on aural scores. Instead of using pre-recorded texts heard by individual spectators as in Hampton and Mercuriali’s *Etiquette*, Theater Ligna broadcasts pre-recorded tracks and texts through live transmission via radio<sup>41</sup>, in this way, airing these texts to a collective body of unrehearsed performers, constituted of “participants — usual radio listeners, no dancers or actors” (Theater Ligna).

When the piece was presented in Lisbon, the group broadcasted a sound track with texts, music and instructions through a national radio station. Prior to the broadcast, the event had been widely publicised in the media, inviting volunteers to

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<sup>41</sup> *Rumor Clandestino*, by Fernando da Costa, directed by Gonçalo Amorim and João Brites (Teatro O Bando), Praça José Fontana, Lisbon, March 27, 2007.

join in as participants, and setting up a meeting point at a shop located in Lisbon's crowded downtown "Rua Augusta" street. On the day of the event, participants received a radio with headphones and a bag with props (a photo camera, flowers, a handkerchief, among others).

When Theater Ligna's broadcast started, participants were scattered along the street, and mixed with passers-by, with no identifying mark other than the use of headphones. The contents of the radio broadcast alternated between fictional text and clear instructions such as: "Lie on the ground as...", "Take a picture of...", "Observe the shop window", or "Mingle unnoticed". In this way, a Radio Ballet assumes a particular involvement of its participants, as indicated by Theater Ligna when reflecting about the origin of Radio Ballet performances in Germany:

The Radio Ballet was not a demonstration (that could have been forbidden by the DB) but a "Zerstreuung" (a German term with different meanings: dispersion, distraction, distribution and, as well: entertainment). It also was not a mass ornament: The participants could act where they wanted to [...] They acted as a free association, which transformed the coincidental constellation of radio reception into a political intervention. (Theater Ligna).

In fact, the scale of events of Radio Ballet — in terms of quantity of people participating, the inhabitation of public spaces and the range of the live transmission — determined that the blurred boundaries between participants, listeners and passers-by is particular. The "constellation" mentioned in the quote above, did not hold a defined shape and anyone was free to join or leave the event at any time. In this regard, the agency of the participants was also as fluid as that of the observing audience, given that both could follow the instructions or not, at any time.

In this way, it is possible to consider these performances as generating three layers of spectatorship. A "first circle", composed by participants who are listening and performing instructions. These participants are observed by the other two cycles of spectatorship: a "second circle", composed of an audience of listeners, who are watching but not performing; and a "third circle", composed of passers-by who are unaware of the radio broadcast, and utterly surprised by the uncanniness of what happens on the street. Thus, the limits of each of these modes of agency are blurred as spectatorship unfolds between acting and gazing.

Playing with this fluidity, Theater Ligna's Radio Ballets create porous situations that camouflage in public space, by appearing and disappearing, and blurring the perception of what is instructed in all that is unrehearsed.

#### Strategy 4: Readership

In this section, I look at a strategy of staging without actors where the act of having audiences reading a script, individually or collectively, constitutes the main performative act. What is significant in this strategy is that the agency of the audience is scored in written scripts. The audience reads the script and follows the score, thus substantiating the autonomy of the performative device. Examples of such artistic practices are *The Quiet Volume* (2010)<sup>42</sup>, by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells and *We Are Still Watching* (2012) by Ivana Müller, among others<sup>43</sup>.

##### Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells: *The Quiet Volume*

*The Quiet Volume* was a performance created by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells in 2010. In this performance, two audience members or “readers / listeners / do-ers / participants” (Hampton 2010) sit side by side at a desk, in a public library, listening to an audio-track, which directs their attention to the surrounding environment and instructs them to perform small tasks, as for example interacting with books and with each other. *The Quiet Volume* attempts to establish a reflective closeness and intimacy for those participating. In this particular performance, this intimacy happens through an interaction with books in the space of a library, a space where: “a combination of silence and concentration within which different peoples’ experiences of reading unfold.”<sup>44</sup> (Hampton)

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42 *The Quiet Volume*, by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, September 17, 2010

43 For example, *All the Players* (2013) by Zhana Ivanova, Rijksacademie OPEN, Amsterdam, November 30, 2013; *Sync* (2012); and *Lar Doce Lar* by Mónica Calle, Festival WAY, Lux, Lisbon, April, 2006

44 In a note regarding the performance *The Quiet Volume*, Hampton recognises the interplay of textualities within the work of his co-creator, British theatre director, artist and writer Etchells. Etchells himself has reflected on the practice of readership as performative: “I’ve been exploring for some time the ways that text always conjures (stages) presence, and the ways that its progress on and over pages is (or parallels) a kind of temporal performative process. The page, for me at least, has something that might be considered a dramaturgical now — a moment in the process of narrative or

The performance is devised according to the model of *Autoteatro*, created by Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali as a form of “self-generated performance” (Rotozaza — Ant Hampton and Silvia Mercuriali). As the directors highlight, *Autoteatro* can be defined as:

- not involving any “audience” beyond the participants themselves
- functioning automatically: there are no actors or human input during the work other than the participants. An *Autoteatro* work is a “trigger” for a subsequently self-generating performance. (Rotozaza)

This “mechanism” is activated by the audience but assumes a “self-generating” quality that is asserted by the structure of the score. In this sense, this mechanism becomes auto-motivable<sup>45</sup> due to the fact that the absence of actors gives way to an automation of the theatrical medium, thus creating a sense of autonomy to the audience.

Ivana Müller: *We Are Still Watching*

*We Are Still Watching*, created in 2012 by Croatian choreographer and performance artist Ivana Müller, also presents a performance of readership. *We Are Still Watching* is a performance that is completely acted out by the audience who, together, reads a script out aloud a script from a booklet, which contains dialogues written in the first-person. The audience, in *We Are Still Watching* acts, as if in a reading rehearsal, where actors first come into contact with their parts and rehearse tentative ways of reading. In this way, the audience also progressed into an “instant community of

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argument, a moment, or set of moments in which the presence of reader/viewer and writer or staged subject find themselves together” (Etchells, cited by Hampton 2010). Many of Etchells’ projects explore displaced textualities and, considering *The Quiet Volume*, it is worth mentioning *A Short Message Spectacle (an S.M.S.)*, by Tim Etchells, Norfolk & Norwich Festival, May 7, 2010, an interactive project displaying mobile phones that allowed for participants to receive SMS’s with instructions, descriptions and questions during the time of the festival.

<sup>45</sup> Auto-nomous (from the Greek “auto” and “nomos”: a name of one’s own). See for example: etymology of Autonomous. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=autonomous](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=autonomous); and Auto-matic (from the Greek “auto” and — among others — “mekhos”: one’s own means). See for example: etymology of Automatic. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=automatic>

‘audience members’ (Müller) whose membership was reinforced by acting together and towards one each another.

Besides the meta-theatrical devising of an audience performing the script, in *We Are Still Watching*, the text itself also addressed the very condition of spectating experienced by the audience while participating. For Müller, this meta-theatrical layer allowed the performance’s script to reflect upon “having a voice”<sup>46</sup>. Müller herself has described this work as:

a piece in which the idea of “spectacle” slowly shifts to where we least expect it. Something that for a moment could look like a bad theatre becomes an invitation to look beyond of what is being scripted. While still staying in the realm of theatre and representation WASW leaves place for something «real» to happen. (Müller)

In setting up such a meta-theatrical model, Müller aimed not only at devising conditions for reflection (of an audience regarding itself) but also at reducing the material elements of the performance — such as performers and set-design — to the suggestiveness and imagination derived from the act of reading. With this reduction of means Müller exposed the concrete medial devising of the theatrical situation in which the performance took place.

Furthermore, it matters to point out how performances of readership may allow for new literary forms to become concrete in the shape of audio files and printed booklets<sup>47</sup> rather than through the body and voice of living actors. The fact that these scripts are texts that lay conditions for performative agency, places them in-between

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<sup>46</sup> In Müller’s account this voicing of the audience was political: “The idea for *We Are Still Watching* came in 2011 when in The Netherlands and in some other countries in Europe some serious changes in the cultural policy and society in general happened. While writing the script and imagining the communities that will read it, we were trying to reflect on the idea of theatre and its place in the contemporary society and at the same time we were working with the problem of « participation », both in theatre and outside of it. In Dutch, and many other European languages, the word « voice » is the same as the word « vote ». [...] We give our voice and then we possibly become politically mute...” (Müller).

<sup>47</sup> “Perhaps a book can be seen as the ultimate portable theatre or event space; a compressed, codified version of both ‘black box’ theatre and ‘white cube’ gallery, flattened into white squares and black lines. As readers / listeners / do-ers / participants, we enter that flat world and enable the strange, triangulated dance between finger, eye and imagination.” (Hampton 2010)

literary texts<sup>48</sup> and performative texts<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, when considered as dramatic literature, these texts maintain the potential of being appropriated and staged by other makers.

### **Conclusion: Automatism and Autonomy**

While in theatre with actors the performance of an actor can be considered to fulfil a mediating role between the audience and the play, in autonomous participatory performances, it is the audience who wholly enacts the performance via instructions. However, although the potential mediating role performed by actors appears to have been distributed to spectators, I wish to argue that it becomes “absorbed” and enacted by the medial apparatuses of autonomous participation. In this regard, it is the mechanics of autonomous participatory performances that fulfil a mediating function. Through participation, spectators are immersed into an environment of play and, as participants, spectators experience not only their surroundings, but also the very means of playing.

As autonomous participation entails a modification of the kind of agency performed, these strategies also entail a modification of the kind of acting subjects. The scoring of automated performances foresees pre-determined ways of acting within their environments of play. Considering these aspects, I will argue in the following

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<sup>48</sup> This last aspect, unexpectedly, aligns performances of readership, to a form of dramatic literature from the 19th century designated as *Théâtre de Fauteuil* (closet drama), considering theatre plays that were written to be read, rather than to be performed by actors in a theatre. There is however, a significant difference between closet drama and performances of readership: while closet drama aimed at solitary readers, contemporary performances of readership focus on exploring the performativity of readers whom are reading together. In the 19th century, closet drama was a reaction against the hazardous nature of theatre and of actors — I develop this subject later in “Chapter 2”. A significant difference is that performances of readership are a participatory device that embraces the hazardous nature of the audience.

<sup>49</sup> Besides closet drama, performative readership conjures two further references: the semiotic approach of theatre and performances, as in Erika Fischer-Lichte *The Semiotics of Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), Patrice Pavis, *Analysing Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003) or Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and the concept of *performative text*, articulated in J.L. Austin’s fundamental notion of “performative utterance” (Austin 1962) but, more recently, by Hans-Thies Lehmann through his post-dramatic approach: “for postdramatic theatre it holds true that the written and/or verbal text transferred onto theatre, as well as the ‘text’ of the staging understood in the widest sense [...] are all cast into a new light through a changed conception of the performance text.” (Lehmann 2006, 85).

that, although autonomous participation implies a degree of automatising of the acting of participating subjects, performing the automation also modifies these subjects.

This relation between the modification of subjects and forms of automated performance recalls how Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes the effect of apparatuses in his essay *What is an Apparatus* (Agamben 2009). In this essay, Agamben defined apparatus as “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions or discourses of living beings.” (Agamben 2009, 14) In a broad way, Agamben indicates that an apparatus is concerned with affecting modes of agency, those “gestures, behaviours, opinions or discourses” performed by subjects. Considering theatre practices with actors, an apparatus can thus be seen as that which models and controls the agency of actors, such as a dramatic play, a director’s way of staging, or the architecture of a theatre building. In the absence of actors, however, it becomes clear that such apparatuses influence the agency of actors as well as all of those who act, including human spectators as well as non-human actants. In the controlled environment of a theatre piece, subjects tend to modify accordingly.

From this perspective we may consider autonomous participatory performances — such as the ones described above — as exemplifying the mechanics of an apparatus. Initially, such performative devices resemble a machine in the sense that they are built to produce a limited number of forms of participation, through a surveyed process of development, and dispensing any exterior (human) interference in its motion. In this way, in these pieces, it is not only the modelling of conditions of participation that constitutes an apparatus but, foremost, the constitution of participation in an autonomous way. This autonomy deems necessary a kind of control that engenders automation and determines a contained space of acting.

The constitution of an apparatus implies the development of an autonomous and repeatable piece, possible to be re-enacted, delegated, or outsourced. In these performances, the score of instructions creates a “scenario” that transforms the performance into a repeatable and self-generating “instructable” where anonymous spectators can become specific acting subjects. As Agamben writes, “the term ‘apparatus’ designates that in which, and through which, one realises a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject” (Agamben 2009, 5). Although these automated sets aim at devising potential “scenarios” to be activated by an audience, they already establish the conditions

of acting, by entailing process of subjectification, for example, of the participant doubling as spectator and performer.

Such a process can be seen, for example, in Müller's *We Are Still Watching*, where autonomous individual participation developed into a self-organizing audience. As Müller writes:

WASW is a show performed by spectators; by an instant community of "audience members" that changes every evening [...] spectators create and perform a community, making decisions individually and collectively. [...] In the "mini-society" that gets created each evening of the show, everybody slowly but surely gets his or her role... (Müller)

In this way, the absencing of the actor leads to the possibility of organising the audience as a self-organised group of spectators that role-play new dramatic impersonations, as well as modifications in the subjectivity of being spectator.

Finally, thinking of these performances as apparatuses does not imply that these are simply considered as mechanisms. Rather, modelling forms of acting is also creating complex networks of equally dependent and mutual relationships, able to shape a way of acting within it. In this way, autonomous participatory performances show that a theatre piece may run autonomously with or without actors, whenever it devises relationships between human or non-human acting subjects, and defines specific modes of acting together.

In this way, a relevant aspect when considering autonomous participatory performances as apparatuses is to consider that this autonomy of subjects and their participation is not strictly mechanical but created to work as an environment, as an eco-system of relations. In the following section, a view of theatre as an eco-system of relations is further developed through examples where non-actors, animals, natural phenomena or the spectator's gaze are staged beyond professional actors or human performers. While many of the examples of performances involve a degree of participation by spectators, the focus of this participation is less on devised strategies of acting together — as underlined in this section — and more on forms of staging aspects of real life and perceiving individually.

### **Section 3 — Making Appear the Apparent: Matter/ Gaze**

In this section, I observe strategies of staging through which theatre makers show the occurrence of natural phenomena in theatres, or through which they intervene in the perception of unprepared events and unrehearsed performers in public spaces. Substantially, in this section, I look into three different strategies: the first strategy, “Staging Non-Actors”, observes the staging of non-actors performing personal stories and professional skills on stage; the second strategy, “Staging Natural Phenomena”, entails staging natural phenomena within theatrical spaces such as animals or chemical reactions; and the third strategy, “Staging Sightseeing”, concerns the staging of the audience’s gaze in the surroundings in which they are immersed in. Considering how these strategies aim at staging aspects of non-theatrical realities and of daily life, they can be seen to intervene between what is artistic as well as what is non-artistic.

In presenting these three strategies, the aim is to make apparent how forms of staging and looking at phenomena that exceed the theatrical frame can also be seen as forms of theatre without actors. For example, I show in this section how, although what is sought in staging non-actors is a quality of performing which appears personal and spontaneous, what is being excluded is the professional training and expertise of actors. Moreover, although what is sought when staging these forms of sightseeing are new modes of co-presence between audiences and their surroundings, this mode of co-presence can be facilitated by the physical absence of actors.

In this way, even when charting strategies of performing without actors, the works presented in this section engage, ultimately, with the experience of perceiving in the theatre. Though many of the examples presented here include human and even professional performers, my argument is that the main point of interest in these performances is located not in the interplay of actors, but in renewing modes of co-presence between audiences, new acting subjects, and the surroundings in which both interact.

#### **Strategy 5: Staging Non-Actors**

The expression “non-actor” refers to performers that act onstage as themselves, given that the main aspect that determines the presence of these performers is their persona and life experience. Non-actors are staged in ways that make perceivable the fact that they are not experienced and trained professionals, but instead, their performance on stage is about themselves and the fact that they perform

“as themselves”. Often, the presence of non-actors is the outcome of a process of rehearsal but, as shown in the following examples of performances, the main aim in staging non-actors is in creating a sense that their acting is not a result of a professional training but stems from their own personal lives. In this way, the performance of a non-actor generates a paradoxical “non-acting”, and becomes the reason why pieces with non-actors can be seen as pieces without (professional) actors. In the following, I illustrate this strategy by referring to four performances, *Gob Squad’s Kitchen* (2007)<sup>50</sup> by Gob Squad, *Factory* (2010)<sup>51</sup> by Gerardo Naumann; *House* (2010)<sup>52</sup> by Dominic Huber, and *Chácara Paraíso* (2008) by Rimini Protokoll.

#### Gob Squad: *Gob Squad’s Kitchen*

Upon entering *Gob Squad’s Kitchen*, created by British-German group Gob Squad in 2007, the audience would see the scenography of an interior room separated from the audience by a wall, inside of which actors were re-enacting scenes from movies by Andy Warhol in front of cameras filming them from inside the room. A live video feed of what was happening in the interior room was projected on the side of a wall that was facing the audience. During the performance, several spectators were invited on stage, in order to replace the cast of actors. On stage, spectators were then instructed via headphones by the actors on what to do or say. In this way, spectators crossed the wall — a concrete “fourth wall”<sup>53</sup> — by performing on stage and live on camera, while actors replaced the spectators in their audience seats: “Our doubles acted using a technique that Gob Squad call “remote acting”, which is to say, they carry out our directions transmitted to in-ear headsets” (Tecklenburg 2012, 29).

Gob Squad refers to these spectators transformed into unrehearsed<sup>54</sup> perfor-

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50 *Gob Squad’s Kitchen*, concept by Gob Squad, devised by Gob Squad, Prater der Volksbühne, Berlin, March 30, 2007

51 *Factory (La Fábrica) (L’Usine)*, by Gerardo Naumann, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am User, Mercedes Factory Marienfeld, Berlin, September 17, 2010

52 *House / Prime Time*, by Dominic Huber, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am User, Apartment Building, Berlin-Kreuzberg, September 17, 2010

53 See for example: “The New Naturalism”, in *Fourth Wall: Theatrical Concept*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/art/fourth-wall>.

54 “For years I’ve been in love with the strange quality of performance that comes from an ‘unrehearsed’ actor, or as is more often the case, ‘non-actor’, agreeing to be watched, agreeing to try, to invest and risk themselves in a performative situation.” (Hampton 2010)

mers as “found performers”. The replacement of the cast exposed differences between rehearsed actors and unrehearsed performers. *Gob Squad* protects this “quality of performance” by instructing the spectators live instead of rehearsing them. The quality of their acting may appear raw and shy because it is, necessarily, a “first time”.

Moreover, in *Gob Squad’s Kitchen*, actors and spectators were clearly distinguished and this distinction suggests the participation of the audience as a form of replacement of the cast of actors. The small group of spectators that replaced the actors were still acting for an audience — in this sense, as actors were before — but their unrehearsed acting allowed for emergent aspects, which were more related to their own personas than to the fictional characters they were being instructed to enact.

In this sense, *Gob Squad’s Kitchen* differs from performances where actors know their lines and movements on stage, and also differs from examples where audiences act in autonomous participatory settings because, in this performance, participants act for an audience and are not only experiencing things by themselves. In attempting to re-enact the filming of a movie in a theatrical setting, *Gob Squad’s Kitchen* decided on the replacement of a cast of actors by the audience: there were no actors but only a form of participated spectatorship<sup>55</sup>. In this way, the performance elicited a meta-level of self-awareness about its own medial conventions: spectators re-enacted theatre actors who had, previously, rehearsed a re-enactment of a film. However, this rehearsal of a re-enactment by the audience becomes, in fact, the aim of the original performance.

In *Gob Squad’s Kitchen*, the concealment of information was instrumental in generating an unrehearsed reaction to information that is given during the very moment of performing. The quality of unrehearsed acting in this piece underlines precisely the particular aspect that the performers were not only untrained as actors but were also unaware of what was going to be acted. In this regard, the piece is, in my view,

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<sup>55</sup> This form of participated spectatorship relates also with what Claire Bishop describes as “delegated performance”, following a “social turn” of contemporary art in the 1990’s: “I will refer to this tendency as delegated performance: the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions. This strategy differs from a theatrical and cinematic tradition of employing people to act on the director’s behalf in the following crucial aspect. The artists I discuss below tend to hire people to perform their own socio-economic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) a profession. (Bishop 2012, 219)

an example of how theatre makers turn to this strategy as a means to make apparent a quality of acting in non-actors that appears to be spontaneous.

The act of surrogacy of *Gob Squad's Kitchen* is demonstrative of a duality inherent to the role of participants on stage. This duality occurs from the fact that spectators are unrehearsed and instructed from outside — as spectators would be in a participatory setting — but they are also acting towards an audience — as actors would. This means that, rather than only acting by themselves, participants are acting towards an audience who acknowledges them neither as spectators or actors, but as non-actors.

#### Gerardo Naumann: *Factory* & Dominic Huber: *House*

Examples of staging non-actors beyond the presence of professional actors can be found in several performances presented in the itinerant festival *Ciudades Paralelas* (2010-13)<sup>56</sup>, curated by Lola Arias and Stefan Kaegi<sup>57</sup>, who invited artists to “devise interventions” in “functional places” of different cities in the world (Arias, Kaegi). The project was composed of eight pieces that had a distinct participatory and site-specific profile, proposing “interventions” that involved the participation of spectators and non-actors, in public and private spaces. In fact, the naming of the places where the pieces took place, eventually entitled the pieces: *Station* (2010)<sup>58</sup> by Mariano Pensotti, *Factory* by Gerardo Naumann, *House* by Dominic Huber,

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56 *Ciudades Paralelas* was presented as an itinerant festival in the sense that it was a temporary event composed of several performances and those performances were presented in several cities, such as Buenos Aires, Utrecht, Singapore or Delhi, among other places. See: *Ciudades Paralelas*. [http://www.ciudadesparalelas.org/menu\\_ingles.html](http://www.ciudadesparalelas.org/menu_ingles.html).

57 The creators detail their concept within the website dedicated to the festival: “Hotel rooms, shopping centres, factories... Functional places are not considered places of interest. They are to be found in every city, and they are what make cities inhabitable as such. These instantly recognizable places live parallel existences around the world, each modelled on similar rules but displaying a local face. [...] eight projects make stages out of public spaces used every day, and seduce the viewers into staying inside that space long enough for their perception to change: Plays that make you subjectively experience places built for anonymous crowds.” (Arias, Kaegi) These projects include a group of performances brought together in what constituted a nomadic festival and was presented in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Warsaw, Zurich and Utrecht.

58 *Station, Sometimes I Think, I Can See You* by Mariano Pensotti, Festival *Ciudades Paralelas*, subway station Hallesches Tor, Berlin, September, 2010

*Court* (2010)<sup>59</sup> by Christian García, *Shopping Centre* (2010)<sup>60</sup> by Theater Ligna, *Library* (2010)<sup>61</sup> by Hampton Etchells, *Hotel* (2010)<sup>62</sup> by Lola Arias and *Roof* (2010)<sup>63</sup> by Stefan Kaegi. In the following I focus on two of the performances presented in *Ciudades Paralelas*, namely, *Factory* and *House*.

In *Factory*, created by Gerardo Naumann in 2010, the audience was guided through real factories, from the entrance door to the assembly line and the director's office. During this trajectory, the audience met real workers, who would interrupt their work for an instant, to address the audience with a prepared scene in which they told a story about themselves. In this way, performers would momentarily overlay their role as workers of the factory with acting rehearsed scenes about themselves, and as themselves. Similarly, in *House*, created by Dominic Huber in 2010, the audience was invited to put on headphones and observe the façade of a building. The audio playing on the headphones was composed of voice recordings of the people living in each apartment, who presented themselves as well as their relation with the building and their neighbours. As the audience listened to these narrations, they could, through the windows of the façade, see these residents in their homes. Synchronised with the recording, these residents — non-actors — executed simple actions mentioned in the recording, such as turning on the light of their room, approaching a window, playing the piano or watching television. In this particular aspect, *House* appropriated the strategy of a participatory audio-walk as a strategy of spectating non-actors. In this way, the devising of the performance elicited a negotiation between public and private spaces, and between theatrical and non-theatrical realities.

As in *Factory*, the audience of *House* was looking at non-actors in their own real places. In this situation, non-actors fulfilled the role of presenting their selves, through biographical texts and by re-enacting small acts of their daily lives. In a

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59 *Court*. In *The Name of the People* by Christian Garcia. Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Landgericht, Berlin, September, 2010

60 *Shopping Centre* by Theater Ligna, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Arkaden am Potsdamer Platz / Alexa am Alexander Platz, Berlin, September 17, 2010

61 *Library (Tour 1): The Quiet Volume* by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Universitätsbibliothek der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, September 17, 2010

62 *Hotel* by Lola Arias, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, IBIS Hotel, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, September 17, 2010

63 *Roof* by Stefan Kaegi, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Festival Centre and Bar of Hebbel am Ufer Theatre, Berlin, September 17, 2010

way, non-actors were simultaneously being and not being theatrical characters, by being momentarily both present and estranged from their own locus of labour and of domestic intimacy.

The pieces that composed *Ciudades Paralelas* were curated and created considering their itinerancy through a diversity of non-theatrical locations. The re-staging of these pieces across different cities implied scouting for similar locations — for example, a factory or an hotel in each of the cities taking part in the festival — as well as sourcing performers and content for each piece locally. This organisational aspect is relevant because it shows how working with non-actors requires a different logistical set-up from when restaging a theatre piece or touring, in the sense that actors are not a permanent part of the cast, but it is their “real-life roles” that are permanent. Seen in this light, these roles become very similar to the fictional characters of dramatic theatre, in the sense that these roles are open to be embodied by any body. However, the examples of *Ciudades Paralelas* suggest that it is not anybody who can perform, for example, the role of the factory worker, but only another factory worker.

This view is relevant for the next example. While the first example of staging non-actors focused on showing a quality of unrehearsed acting, the second example focused on how personal characters were staged. In the following case, the staging of non-actors focuses on demonstrating personal and professional expertise. Examples of this strategy can be found in many of the works of German company Rimini Protokoll — such as *Mnemopark* (2005), *Call Cutta* (2008)<sup>64</sup>, *Radio Muezzin* (2008)<sup>65</sup>, and *Lagos Business Angels* (2012)<sup>66</sup> — and the group has taken up the term “experts” to refer to a strategy of casting and staging non-actors who are addressed as experts. They bring to stage not only a technical or personal discursivity related with their expertise but, also, the ability to demonstrate such skill.

#### Rimini Protokoll: *Chácara Paraíso*

An example of a piece where the expertise of non-actors was used as a strategy of theatre without professional actors is *Chácara Paraíso Police Art Show*, created by Rimini Protokoll in 2007. This was a performance that evolved around personal

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<sup>64</sup> *Call Cutta in a Box – An Intercontinental Phone Play* by Rimini Protokoll, Berlin, Mannheim, Zürich April 2, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> *Radio Muezzin* by Stefan Kaegi — Rimini Protokoll, Cairo and Berlin, December 2008.

<sup>66</sup> *Lagos Business Angels* by Rimini Protokoll, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, March 25, 2012

stories of police officers working in the city of São Paulo, in Brazil. The police officers participating in this performance shared in common the fact that they had been trained in the largest police-training centre in South-America, known as *Chácara Paraíso*.

The performance aimed at moving against stereotypical images of police, and distributed a cast of non-actors through different rooms, inside of which they individually performed a rehearsed scene to a small group of spectators. The performance was structured as a tour inside a building and the audience walked between rooms and scenarios. This setting allowed non-actors and audience to experience a degree of intimacy, as personal stories were told in a proximal, levelled, close contact. In this way, current and former police officers, turned non-actors, would demonstrate an expertise connected with their lives as police officers. For example, one performer demonstrated how to neutralise people with a police dog; and yet another, demonstrated how to shoot a gun; while other how to break into a crime scene.

This setting makes the presence of people “on stage” more concrete and realistic, as they talked about their experience or demonstrated their skills or knowledge. The staging of non-actors aimed at establishing a connection between audience and stage, as explained by Daniel Wetzel, one of the theatre makers of *Rimini Protokoll*:

The fact that you identify with a character in the play and therefore want to follow its story; that it tells you something because something has happened in your own life that makes you connect to it. We experimented with this very connection and said, let’s get rid of this whole process of actors performing a text so that people in the audience can relate to it — let’s put the people from the audience on stage and work with them on this connection. (Wetzel quoted in Boenisch 2008)

The presence of “the people from the audience on stage” is prepared, trained, rehearsed in order to communicate a given aspect of their lives to an audience. This preparation of the “givens” of a person reworked into a theatrical form, such as speech, movement on stage and, also, to demonstrations. In this way, the demonstration of an expertise becomes a performative form of appearance of non-actors on stage and a form of performing the real, or rather, of staging the performing of a non-theatrical practice in the theatre.

In this strategy, non-actors are staged in ways that privilege the sharing and

showing of aspects of their daily lives and personal stories. The persona performed by a non-actor in this way is one's own character. In this regard, for example, this strategy is distinct from the previous regarding unrehearsed acting, in the particular aspect that this strategy focuses on a character that is presented on stage. However, this character is not a fictional character, as in dramatic theatre, but of an existing person. I propose that, in the case of the performances such as *Chácara Paraíso Police Art Show*, non-actors are seen as "dual selves". Presenting the real character of a person in a theatre piece by the person in question intersects with the perception of the performer's personal life and of the performer's modes of being present on stage.

Due to the focus on the unrehearsed-ness of non-actors, and on the staging of their life stories or work skills, what allows for these pieces with non-actors to be seen as examples of theatre without actors is the fact that these performers are not professionally trained actors. In this regard, it is relevant to note that examples of theatre with non-actors can be seen as examples of theatre without actors, but with human performers.

In the performances in this section, performers are, very often, part of an artistic process rather similar to what an actor would be part of — from rehearsing a piece to being contracted to act in a theatre piece — and their performance on stage is markedly manifest as "non-acting". What determines a "negation" of acting in their performance is, primarily, the fact that they are not professionally trained performers. However, as I show in the following, these performers are also referred to as non-actors because theatre makers wish to suggest that their acting bears the opposite of a trained kind of acting (that of a professional actor). This corresponds to a kind of acting which may appear more unprepared and spontaneous, and closer to each non-actor's personality and life experience. In this way, though they perform rehearsed actions within a theatrical stage, the presence of non-actors is intended to be perceived as unmediated, untrained and authentic, thus staged as a negotiation between theatrical and non-theatrical realities.

Given the irreversible absence of human physical presence in pieces with non-humans and matter, the most urgent issue concerning theatre without actors could appear to be about strategies of staging non-human actants. However, during this research, it became evident to me that it was relevant to consider performances with non-actors and with spectators as examples of theatre performed without actors, but with human performers. By considering pieces with human performers as forms of theatre without actors — and not only pieces with non-humans and matter — I am proposing a view according to which performances with spectators and

non-actors can be seen as a form of staging aspects of real-life, as well as underlining how the professional training of actors becomes the main aspect to be suppressed in the staging of spectators and non-actors

### **Strategy 6: Staging Natural Phenomena**

This strategy relates with the act of staging natural phenomena within the delimited spaces of theatres and of theatrical contexts. The pieces shown here exemplify ways of staging animals and chemical reactions beyond the presence of actors. Rather than physically present actors, the performances in this section seek ways to stage a co-presence between audience and phenomena, within delimited artistic spaces rather than in a real-life surrounding. The possibility to capture and present natural phenomena and their properties allows theatre makers to come closer to matters and expose concrete particularities in an enclosed and controlled environment of experimentation. But beyond that, the staging of natural phenomena also entails a reformulation of the act of spectating, by demanding the ability of observing but also of framing. In order to demonstrate this strategy, I introduce pieces by Belgian artist Kris Verdonck and Dutch artist Wim T. Schippers.

#### *Wim T. Schippers: Going to the Dogs*

A first way of staging natural phenomena beyond the presence of actors can be seen in forms of staging animals, either interacting with humans or completely by themselves. In the field of professional performing arts, it is easier to find examples where animals perform with humans than cases where animals act exclusively by themselves. The reason might be that when humans perform along animals, this allows for rehearsing a contrasting between a controllable presence of human performers with the possibly rehearsed, but potentially unpredictable being of animals.

Although this form of staging animals addresses the rehearsal of relations of co-presence between animals and humans in the theatre, my focus is on an example of a piece where only animals perform to an audience, namely, *Going to the Dogs* (1986)<sup>67</sup> by Dutch artist Wim T. Schippers. This performance clearly exemplifies a case of a piece with animals and without actors, but it also raises questions about

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<sup>67</sup> *Going to the Dogs*, by Wim T. Schippers, Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam, September 19, 1986

the relation sought between stage and audience. In this way, my aim is to look at the staging of animals, not only as a strategy for replacing the human actor, but also as a way of envisioning a kind of theatre where the theatrical space is not occupied by the human as a central figure, but seen as an ecosystem for different kinds of non-human performers.

*Going to the Dogs* is a rare example of a performance entirely performed by animals to a human audience. Schippers' piece was a family drama performed by six German shepherds in the realistic set design of the interior of a living room. The piece was a sell-out success, with full houses during the two days it was presented, driven by the curiosity and scandal brought by the provocation of a piece entirely performed by dogs at the Stadsschouwburg, one of the most symbolical stages of Amsterdam, and financed by state funding. The fact that the piece was presented at the Stadsschouwburg and entertained a close relation with the media, made the performance being perceived primarily as a stunt. Schippers declared that the dogs had been trained for six months by the police, and that on stage, their actions were "prompted by pieces of meat and cookies thrown in the required direction" (Schippers quoted in *The Blade* 1986, 3).

Schippers' performance with dogs seems to have been, first and foremost, a detailed staging of animals within an purportedly human and domestic set design. In this way, rather than exploring the contrast between dogs and humans, this superimposing generated effects of humour or contempt.<sup>68</sup> Regarding the purpose of the performance, Schippers declared that "the difference between people on stage and dogs, is that people act while dogs remain normal. Thinking about that gives you a new perspective on the theatre" (Schippers quoted in *The Blade* 1986, 3). This suggests that Schippers' aim was not only to be provocative, but also to highlight the difference between humans and dogs in terms of the quality of their agency on stage. This may be the reason why the contrast between animal behaviour and the human environment of theatre was made so evident, namely, by allowing animals to eat, sleep or defecate in the institutional frame of a state theatre, or by framing their presence within the plot of a psychological family drama. In this way, by

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<sup>68</sup> A lasting effect of the performance was the inclusion of a painted portrait of the leading performer, the female German shepherd Ilja van Vinkeloord, in the collection of portraits of important actors in Dutch theatre displayed in the halls of the Stadsschouwburg. This inclusion may be seen as a humorous reaction in continuity with Schipper's provocatory piece but, nevertheless, it acknowledges the non-human animal as an actor.

highlighting the agency of minimally trained animals on stage, Schippers' interest seemed to be in challenging the modes of reception of theatre, and the audience's "perspective on the theatre".

Strategies for staging animals disrupt the expectation of a controlled, rehearsed habitat and bear resistance to being represented. Or, in the words of scholar Konstantina Georgelou, these examples "lower the humanness of the human body and radically resist anthropocentric theatre costumes. Hence, these performances let an unexpected 'being-with' between human and non-human animal bodies happen on stage" (Georgelou 2011, 123). Besides the exceptionality of watching an animal on a staged setting, non-human animals also capture the gaze of the audience because they introduce risk or chance to such rehearsed processes. In this sense, the presence of non-human animals on stage can be seen as a strategy for theatre without actors because non-human animals are present as acting bodies, and their agency modifies the kinds of relation established between audiences and stage.

Kris Verdonck; *Mass*, *Shell*, and *Box*.

Three pieces by Kris Verdonck exemplify strategies by which natural phenomena is staged in contained spaces: *Mass* (2010)<sup>69</sup>, *Shell* (2010)<sup>70</sup>, and *Box* (2008)<sup>71</sup>. The piece *Mass* — one of the parts of the cycle *ACTOR#1* — was an "odd, poetic landscape: a sort of moving milk — white snowy carpet or a dance of thick clouds of mist [...] (where) matter moves independently and determines its own energy" (Verdonck). The "thick cloud of mist" was an elusive and light body that appeared like waves in the contained space of a box, around which the audience gathered, looking inside into a well, immersed in an "atmospheric" soundscape<sup>72</sup>.

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69 *Mass*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaistudio's, Brussels, January 14, 2010

70 *Shell*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaitheater, Brussels, February 26, 2010

71 *Box*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, De Warande, Turnhout, February 2, 2005

72 In the words of Peter Eckersall, *Mass* was "a swirling mass of smoke [...] a dense fog emanating from a central pool seemed to begin to breathe. [...] People were free to walk around the piece and often lowered their hands into its depths or simply watch its slow moving undulations. Sound effects amplified the industrial hissing sounds of the smoke and made for an intense atmosphere [...] a contrast to the dry tone of the programme note, describing *Mass* as a: 'A poetic landscape of constantly moving sculpted mists in which chemical and physical processes are taking

In *Shell*, fireworks were detonated inside a transparent box. In this piece, lighting was not gradual but violently irregular and explosive. The fact that the detonation was happening inside the box allowed spectators to be much closer than usual to the event. Similar to *Shell*, in *Box*, a transparent box enclosed a lamp. The audience entered a white cube room, and was given special glasses to filter light. The lamp was switched on and was lit very dimly at first. The intensity of light was progressively increased, to a point in which it became impossible and dangerous to look at directly with the naked eye. At this point, the audience naturally put on the special glasses to resist the violence of the white lighting. *Box* is significant as a performance with phenomena — electricity and light — but it also performs a metaphor about enlightenment, suggesting a meditation on the Platonic idea pertaining to human access to the reality of things: it is impossible to look at the source of light but only at what is enlightened. Furthermore, while at first the light casted shadows of its onlookers, the progressive intensity of the light eventually absorbed those shadows.

These three pieces created by Verdonck share in common their aim of primarily staging natural phenomena, by demonstrating its occurrence and immersing the onlooker in an experiencing of the phenomena. The givens being observed in these performances are not artificially created but are framed, exposed, and shown through performative theatrical strategies. The devices approach the notion of performance, theatre and representation in bare, minimal and conceptual ways, by focusing more on the modes of observing than on what is being observed. In this regard, scholar Peter Eckersall reflects on how Verdonck's work recuperates a view of theatre as a practice of showing.

Verdonck explores ideas of theatre as a way of framing a sensible encounter that combines physical properties and metaphorical aspects. Even with the presence of high technology, he seems to want to recuperate an almost classical and formal idea of theatre wherein the capacity to show things to an audience is powerfully evoked through a demonstrable framing of the notion of theatrical space. (Eckersall 2012, 68)

The strategy of staging natural phenomena by enclosing it in contained spaces presents the “demonstrable framing of the notion of theatrical space” that Eckersall acknowledges in Verdonck's work. In devising ways of showing natural phenomena,

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place” (Festival a/d Werf 2011). (Eckersall 2012, 73)

theatre makers are also demonstrating the functioning of theatre as a space for showing things — as a space of “visuality”. An account of visuality was in particular investigated by Dutch scholar Maaïke Bleeker, who indicates that:

the object of visual analysis is the way things become visible as a result of the practices of looking invested in them [...] visuality consists of an intricate intertwining of the one seeing and of what is seen as a result of which we always see more, and always see less, than what is there to be seen. (Bleeker 2011, 2, 7)

Operating a critical dissection of the seer of theatre — of what is seen onstage and of the relations established between them — Bleeker questions how to account for the act of “just looking” as a necessarily impure and always synaesthetic event that takes place in a body as the locus of intertwining of various perceptual systems” (Bleeker 2011, 7). Bleeker’s account is relevant because, in the cases of strategies for staging matter beyond human actors, a special attention must be given to the modes of seeing, of what is given-to-see and how. Processes of visuality in theatre are not a given but rather a layered set-up of mediations that allow for seers of performances of animals, of natural phenomena and of sightseeing to “always see more, and always see less” than what is shown. In this way, the absence of actors does not promote an un-mediated access to the real, but renewed mediations of seeing the real. In this way, performances without actors that attempt to stage the apparent, the unrehearsed, the non-fictional realms of the real, also show the constitution of the spectatorial gaze. As Bleeker indicates,

Rather than define theatre as an unchanging identifiable object in the real, we might rethink it as a culturally conditioned mode of staging the construction of the real’ writes Barbara Freedman in *Staging the Gaze* (Freedman 1991, 50) [...] theatre and reality appear as parallel constructions appealing to similar ways of looking. Theatre presents a *staging* of the construction that is also constitutive of the real. (Bleeker 2011, 9)

Arriving at this point, we can wonder whether performances staging the real without actors are staging the real or, rather, developing and appropriating mediations of the real. The real, I suppose, can never be a given in the theatre, but always a mediated phenomenon. It is not simply seen, but visualised. In this way, forms of staging

realities become also strategies of staging the constructions that mediate the real into appearance.

### Strategy 7: Staging Sightseeing

The performances presented here consider ways of structuring acts of observation within theatrical contexts as well as ways to develop the means to perform such practice beyond the acting of actors. The examples I introduce here include: *The Big Movement* (2006)<sup>73</sup> by Dries Verhoeven, *Sonde Hannover* (2002)<sup>74</sup> by Rimini Protokoll, and *Here Whilst We Walk* (2006) by Gustavo Ciríaco and Andrea Sonnberger. Observation is enhanced in these performances, primarily, by creating a clear sense of separation between audience and theatrical scene, and by using medial devices that renew the gaze of the audience over the surroundings in which they are immersed.

The spectatorial gaze is not only constituted from the space being watched, but also by being implicated in such space. In this way, although the following examples can be seen in alignment with the participatory strategies referred above — in “Aural Scores” and “Readership” — this duality of spectating from within, while also from a (formal) distance, shows how the constitution of gaze is the most significant aspect in these cases. This aspect grounds a way of looking at the performances of this section as forms of performing without actors, rather than only as forms of participatory performance. In these performances, the strategy highlights where the audience’s gaze is directed at, such as to things, people, landscapes and unrehearsed events.

#### Dries Verhoeven: *The Big Movement*

As in the examples discussed above, it is the distancing of the audience from the theatrical scene that initially establishes conditions of observation in *The Big Movement*, created by Dries Verhoeven in 2006. However, in this piece in particular,

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<sup>73</sup> *The Big Movement*, by Dries Verhoeven, dramaturgy by Paulien Geerlings, Theatre Festival Boulevard, s’Hertogenbosch, 2006

<sup>74</sup> *Sonde Hannover*, concept by Bernd Ernst, Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Kim Haug, and Daniel Wetzel, directed by Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Kim Haug, and Daniel Wetzel (Rimini Protokoll), Kröpcke-Hochhaus, Hannover, June 8, 2002

the audience was seated inside a large black box installed outside a rail station square, during daytime. The interior of this black box, housed a small-enclosed cinema with seats, facing a screen. On this screen, Verhoeven projected a video of the exterior street, in real time. In fact, the video showed the street in the same direction as the seats were installed, allowing the audience to see on screen what they would see if they were to stand in the same place outside the black box. In this regard, the live feed and the setting transformed the screen into a sort of “window”, through which the audience could look outside beyond the wall of the room, without being seen.

The *Big Movement* consisted of watching this live video stream, while hearing a female voice narrating in “voiceover”, and in Chinese (with subtitles) from the future, what had taken place in a fictional distant past — which in fact corresponded to the present time. The subtitles of this voiceover appeared on the screen, and functioned as a sort of comment on the live video feed of the street outside. In this way, by reading a description “of a time past” against the real-time video feed of events that were taking place, the performance suggested the experience of seeing a live video transmission as if it was a documentary of a past time.

Then, at a certain moment, the live streaming halted, and the film rewinded in slow motion, allowing for what was just seen as a real-time feed of outside the room, to be slowly re-seen, but now in reverse. This rewinding of the film continued to the point where the audience saw themselves entering the room and beginning to observe the live video feed. However, the film rewinded even beyond that point — which the audience located as the start of the performance — showing a moment in time, prior to the start of the performance, where an Asian-looking woman slowly stepped into the field of the video frame, looking directly at the camera (and audience) and speaking. In this way, she embodied the Chinese-speaking voice that had remained off-screen up to that moment.

In this performance, the change in how the audience perceives the live feed implied a change in how reality and time were perceived. The impression of spectating a live broadcasting was disturbed both by rewinding the video beyond its beginning point and the exposure of the medial device of film. Moreover, the experience of re-watching the video backwards and in slow motion, allowed for an experiencing, not only of the live streamed, but also of a mediated past.

Furthermore, it is worth considering that, even if this performance includes a human actor — the Chinese-speaking woman who embodies the narrator — still, the theatrical elements in this performance privilege the setting of a point of view

and the placing of the audience as voyeur. The theatrical experience becomes less about “what” happens, and more about “how” one looks at what happens. In this sense, the medial devices do not operate based on the question “what is there to see?” but rather to explore “how to see what is there?”. In this sense, this particular framing of reality, characteristic to forms of “theatre of observation”, constitutes a strategy of theatre without actors. The staging of the audience as voyeur refers to a common experience in theatre — that of the audience observing a theatre play from a darkened room — but this time, the audience watched the unaltered public space in a live-film, where the screen became a literal “fourth wall”.

#### Rimini Protokoll: *Sonde Hannover*

In *Sonde Hannover*, created by Rimini Protokoll in 2002, the audience gathered at the tenth floor of a skyscraper, and was seated facing large windows that allowed for a bird’s eye view over the city centre of Hannover. A red curtain covered these large windows, and the performance started with the opening of this curtain, and the disclosing of the window frame and the view beyond it — alluding to the opening of the curtains in the proscenium frame of the theatre, signalling the start of a play. After the curtains were open, the audience was invited to survey the city by using binoculars. Moreover, Rimini Protokoll placed actors in the square in front of the windows, in order to foster interaction and initiate dialogues with passers-by. The sound of this square was amplified via microphones into the room where the audience was observing the scenes.

The fact that the audience was separated and distant from where the theatrical scene occurred was overcome by the use of binoculars and the audio transmission. Significantly, these means, seen to bridge the gap between the audience and the space of performance, can also be understood as “mediums”, that is, as what lies “in-between” and mediates the experience of perceiving. In *Sonde Hannover*, these means were mediating the physical distance between the theatrical space at the street level, and the audience at the top of the building. In this way, besides the planned actions by performers of Rimini Protokoll, the purposeful setting of medial strategies allowed for unrehearsed events on the street to be perceived as performative, regardless of the presence of actors.

Gustavo Ciríaco and Andrea Sonnberger: *Here Whilst We Walk*

Another form of staging observation can be found in forms of walking tours, exemplified here by *Here Whilst We Walk* created by Gustavo Ciríaco and Andrea Sonnberger in 2006. Drawing on “the long tradition, which links the practice of walking to the production of thought and awareness” (Ciríaco), the performance consisted of a contemplative, silent walking tour in the streets and public spaces of a neighbourhood. The setting of *Here Whilst We Walk* was apparently similar to that of a touristic group tour. However, here the group walked together, joined by an elastic rubber band, enclosed by the space created by the elastic. The group walked in silence, not communicating amongst each other nor with passers-by.

The elastic rubber band clearly established a sense of border between the group and the outside world. To the audience circumscribed within its circle and kept to their vow of silence, everything around and beyond the elastic band was perceived as separate. The simple devices of separation — elastic rubber band, the agreement about silence, and compliance with the event as a performance — generated a crucial separation that allowed for a re-appearance of the street under a spectating view. In this way, the walk generated a clear spectating experience of real, non-artistic and unrehearsed surroundings.

**Conclusion: Performing and Perceiving**

In the strategies of this section, humans and non-human agents are staged in ways that make their presence and acting appear spontaneous and unrehearsed. In this interplay with the realities of what is unprepared and unrehearsed, one of the most important aspects concerns how something non-theatrical is staged in such a way as to preserve a theatrical quality. In the examples shown above, theatre makers opt to intervene minimally in what is brought on stage and, rather, invest in the ways of staging, of seeing and perceiving what is shown on stage. In this way, the absence of actors follows an interest in staging the “matter” of natural phenomena as well as the “gaze” of the audience. For example, while in the first strategy with non-actors, the artistic process carefully prepared the performance of non-professionals, in strategies of staging sightseeing, what is shown is, to a large extent, circumstantial and unpredictable. In these cases, the reception of a performative artwork becomes, instead, a perceptive experience, where audiences are “sensitised” to perceive and participate in their surroundings in renewed ways.

The strategies of this section tend to dispute the space between reality and

fiction, between public physical space and private space, between collective and individual, as well as between roles of spectator and actor. Moreover, these strategies destabilise perceptions of co-presence between spectators and the staging of unrehearsed phenomena. The pieces mentioned as examples not only constitute performances devoid of actors, but more importantly, exemplify how the absence of the actor allows for a reconfiguration of relations of co-presence between audiences and their surrounding reality.

Considering this aspect, I would like to introduce yet another example. In the following, I introduce an artistic strategy named as “audio walk”, created by Canadian artist Janet Cardiff who describes concrete steps towards this effect of “sensitising” the audience to their surroundings. *Audio Walks* (1991-2005)<sup>75</sup>, comprise a series of works by Cardiff where she explores the development of sound scores applied to participatory situations. As Cardiff writes:

you hear my voice giving directions, like “turn left here” or “go through this gateway”, layered on a background of sounds [...] My voice gives directions but also relates thoughts and narrative elements, which installs in the listener a desire to continue and finish the walk. (Cardiff)

Similarly to “audio guide” models which are used in museums to guide a visitor throughout its galleries and provide information about exhibited works, Cardiff’s “Audio Walks” present a model designed for the participation of one spectator at a time, by listening to a pre-recorded audio track of texts and sounds while wandering in the midst of public spaces.

In the making of an audio walk, Cardiff underlines that a recorded soundscape should overlay a real soundscape. For Cardiff, this overlaying serves the purpose of merging the virtual and the physical in order to assert continuity, that is, a blending of the fictional into the reality of the walk: “[sounds] have been pre-recorded on the same site as they are being heard. This is the important part of the recording. The virtual recorded soundscape has to mimic the real physical one in order to create a new world as a seamless combination of the two” (Cardiff). The superimposing of pre-recorded tracks and sound from the surroundings, through the devising of aural scores, bears the

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<sup>75</sup> Reference to a series of audio walks initiated by Janet Cardiff and currently co-directed by Georges Bures Miller: The first walk directed by Cardiff is *Forest Walk*, by Janet Cardiff, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canadian Artist in Residence Program, 1999. A full listing of audio walks can be found at Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, *Walks*, <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/index.html>

potential to act as a sort of pervasive force that layers over reality, blurring some things of the real world while making others surface.

The experiencing of the public space is filtered through a fictional account that is given to the spectator through an aural experience, but also through the actions that the spectator is brought to perform while listening, such as walking, listening, observing. The strategy of the audio walk successfully creates an immersive atmosphere within real life environments by depending on these simultaneities — on the layering of real and fictional. It is precisely in the instants of perceptive dis-orientation<sup>76</sup> opened by this layering, that an epistemological experience is conveyed. As scholar Sarah Gorman writes in relation to Cardiff's audio walk:

Cardiff's work seeks to alter viewing conditions [...] to challenge epistemologies relating to representations of the cultural diversity of the city and of the self. (Gorman 2010, 168)

Similarly to audio walks, spectators of autonomous participatory performances appear to be given the opportunity for an un-mediated access to reality. However, this is constituted through a number of mediations — perhaps, even more mediations than in the case of a piece with professional human actors, who could embody the performing of mediation by guiding the audience's attention or participation. In this way, it seems that pieces taking up strategies of staging sightseeing create a paradox concerning the spectator's gaze, that becomes mediated in order to make believe that what is seen is unmediated and given.

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<sup>76</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann reflects on how participation in theatre implies a dis-location in spectatorship: "When the staging practice forces the spectators to wonder whether they should react to the events on stage as fiction (i.e. aesthetically) or as reality (for example, morally), theatre's treading of the borderline of the real unsettles this crucial predisposition of the spectators: the unreflected certainty and security in which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour. [...] The aesthetic distance of the spectator is a phenomenon of dramatic theatre; in the new forms of theatre that are closer to performance this distance is structurally shaken in a more or less noticeable and provocative way." (Lehmann 2006, 103, 104)

### **Conclusion: Expanded Acting**

The seven strategies presented in this first chapter allow for an overview of practices of contemporary performing where there are no professional actors or even human performers. These examples demonstrate that the absenting of professional actors and human performers challenges views about theatrical acting, spectatorship and co-presence, and elicits new relations between human and non-human performers and spectators, as well as between audiences and their surrounding environment. These strategies are not fixed containers, but rather, this classification is porous, as performances can be seen to relate to more than one strategy.<sup>77</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I focused my approach in demonstrating two aspects that are recurrent through the seven strategies: how they make apparent the interests of theatre and performance makers in staging the presence of something or someone in order to be perceived in the concreteness of its materiality, rather than as vehicles for fiction; as well as how strategies of theatre and performance without professional actors or human performers reconfigure the ways in which audiences and acting subjects are co-present in theatrical contexts, thereby challenging assumptions about the role of the physical presence of actors and of their professional expertise, as well as the diverse configurations of co-presence between audience and stage, and how the ability of acting can be seen to include non-professional and non-human agents.

My discussion of these strategies of staging in theatre without actors demonstrates that, in pieces without actors, theatrical agency appears to be determined by an ecosystem of medial and material relations, rather than as an exclusive attribute of the human performer. In pieces with actors, the actors may seem to be the only ones with agency. However, works without actors suggest that who or what can appear as having agency is also determined by performative/performing apparatuses. As seen in the examples above, the different strategies aim to re-distribute the agency usually associated with actors in a diversity of ways.

Performances without actors thus draw attention to the fact that the ability of acting is not a given of professionally trained actors or even of human actors but that, instead, the ability of acting is significantly determined by theatrical apparatuses. As seen above, such apparatuses can include the devising of participatory scores, of technological settings, or of forms of staging natural phenomena. Through the strategies associated

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<sup>77</sup> For example, performances staging mechanical movement in “Autonomous Machines” can be seen as forms of “Staging Natural Phenomena”; while strategies of “Staging Sightseeing” can resonate with the participatory strategies in “Environments of Play: Staging Spectators”.

with these approaches, the ability of acting is expanded beyond professionally trained actors and enacted by spectators, non-actors, technology, animals and matter.

Accordingly, the absence of the actor determines a modification in the perception of a fundamental — and etymological — aspect of the “actor”: the performance of acting. A visible sign of a change in modes of acting in the theatre is the diversity of possible names attributable to who or what is acting on performances without actors. Human performers have usually been referred to as “actor” or “performer” but, more recently, they are also addressed as “participant” (Theater Ligna), “found performer” (Gob Squad 2010, 90), “interpreter” as proposed by Tino Sehgal (Collins 2012), “expert” as forwarded by Rimini Protokoll (McKechnie 2010), “non-actor” (Hampton 2010), “interactor” (Picon-Vallin 1998), or “spect-actor” as coined by Augusto Boal (Boal 2000, xxi); while a non-living performer can be referred to as “object” (Verdonck) or “actroid” (Eckersall et al. 2017, 129).

Through new modes of acting and spectating, practices of theatre without actors rehearse distributions of artistic agency beyond the human actor, and acknowledge the presence of non-human and non-living matter as performative. However, this chapter demonstrates that the issue about theatre without actors should not remain circumscribed either within the absence of the performer or the presence of the non-human, but should be open to new relations that are elicited by both. These new forms of being co-present shed new light on theatrical acting with humans, on the relation between humans and non-humans in theatrical ecosystems and beyond, by rehearsing modes of co-presence between theatrical and real-life situations.

While for the first time in theatre history there is an abundance of current examples of performances without actors, still, the idea of absenting the actor from stage is not new and has a history of its own. Throughout this chapter there were instances in which it was possible to draw connections between contemporary strategies of theatre without actors and historical references, namely: the relation between the video doubles created by Marleau and Verdonck and references to Beckett and Maeterlinck; the possibility of establishing a relation between the contemporary staging of machines and an interest in mechanical motion and anthropomorphic mechanisms between the eighteenth and 20th centuries; and the relation between performances of readership and closet drama.

In the following chapter, I continue an approach to theatre without actors as a practice that engages with modifications in ways of acting and of perceiving in the theatre. However, instead of looking at the contemporary field of the performing arts, this view is grounded in references on absenting the actor in modern theatre history, namely: in performances staging mechanical phenomena and natural phenomena between the

17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and in essays discussing the aims and means of withdrawing the actor from stage between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This approach establishes that, rather than being a recent or isolated idea, the idea of theatre without actors has in fact been discussed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is a part of relevant theoretical approaches in theatre history.

## Chapter 2

### — Views About Absenting the Actor in Theatre History

#### Introduction

In the first chapter I discussed performances without actors presented since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, experiments in practices of theatre without actors have taken place at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, while discourses about absenting the actor from theatre have been put forth since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, I engage with these historical references: in the first section, by introducing performances without actors presented between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and, in the second section, by observing texts written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that experimented and discussed the absenting of the actor. The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate that theatre without actors is not an exceptional oddity of contemporary theatre, but a development that has its roots in modern theatre history, as well as in practices of staging that involved staging mechanisms or staged demonstrations. Furthermore, in this chapter, I show how there are differences and affinities between the aims, strategies and contexts of absenting actors in the past and in the present.

The staging of *Les Aveugles* (2002) by Denis Marleau is an illustrative example of how contemporary theatre without actors explicitly relates to both kinds of past references outlined above (historical practices of staging and reflections about the possibility of theatre without actors). In his work, Marleau refers to the essay “Un Théâtre d’Androïdes” (1880) by Maeterlinck, who is also the author of the dramatic text of *Les Aveugles* (Maeterlinck 2010). In “Un Théâtre d’Androïdes” Maeterlinck questions whether it wouldn’t be better to withdraw the actor from theatre.

Regarding *Les Aveugles*, Marleau also refers<sup>78</sup> to *Phantasmagoria* (1797)<sup>79</sup> by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson. *Phantasmagoria* was a show of “lanterna magica” — a pre-cinema device that projects still images, staged images associated with the apparition of ghosts. Robertson’s *Phantasmagoria* appears to have inspired Marleau in two regards: to create a piece where the main focus of attention are optical effects that simulate human presence, rather than physically present actors; and to appropriate the term of *Phantasmagoria* to name his own cycle of pieces without actors as *Fantasmagories Technologiques*<sup>80</sup>.

The first part of this chapter is entitled “Brief Account of Strategies of Performing Beyond Actors Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, and addresses performances of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that, like Robertson’s *Phantasmagoria*, develop strategies of staging where the actor is not the main focus of attention or is entirely absent. The second part is entitled “Absenting the Actor: Looking for the Nature of the Medium”, and addresses discourses of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that, like Maeterlinck’s “Un Théâtre d’Androïdes”, reflect on the possibility of absenting the actor from theatre. In each of these parts, I focus on the means and aims of creating theatre without actors. Furthermore, I make apparent how, in these periods, the absenting of the actor was not an end in itself, but part of an expanded view of theatre that included staging the agency of non-humans, and challenged definitions of theatre. In this way, I demonstrate how views about theatre without actors unfolded in historical times and illuminate how the idea of theatre without actors is integrally part of the

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78 In an interview with Joelle Gayot, Marleau explains: “Je l’aborde d’une façon concrète sur le plan de l’interprétation mais avec une liberté certaine quant au choix des outils. Ma proposition intègre aussi une réalité historique, celle des illusionnistes qui ont parcouru l’Europe aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles et qui ont vraisemblablement nourri l’imaginaire du jeune Maeterlinck. Par exemple, ce physicien astronome belge, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson qui a inventé en 1799 le phantascope, une lanterne magique sur roues qui projetait des images sur un écran transparent. Ces animations spectrales et mouvantes dans une chambre obscure effrayaient alors les spectateurs. J’applique le même procédé, mais à partir des techniques d’aujourd’hui. Le sous-titre « fantasmagorie technologique » me semble traduire cette liaison entre l’origine ancienne de cette technicité et son application actuelle.” In *Passion Théâtre*, “Entretien avec Denis Marleau par Joelle Gayot”, *Dossier de Presse*. Available at: [http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti\\_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id\\_planning=6375](http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id_planning=6375)

79 *Phantasmagoria*, by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, Pavillon de l’Echiquier, Paris, January 23, 1798

80 *Fantasmagorie technologique* was the subtitle of Marleau’s staging of *Les Aveugles*. However, the expression was also used to entitle the subsequent productions employing the same video projection technique as *Les Aveugles*, namely, *Comédie* (2004) and *Dors Mon Petit Enfant* (2004).

modern history of Western theatre, and neither a new or exceptional tendency of contemporary theatre.

## Brief Account of Strategies of Performing Beyond Actors Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

### Introduction

In this section, I briefly introduce a number of performances presented between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that developed strategies of staging theatre beyond the physical presence or the professional acting of actors. Although these performances were not framed by discourses about absenting the actor from the theatrical stage, I find these examples to be relevant for how they present historical precedents to theatre without actors. In the following, I group examples within three main strategies of staging, by considering artistic and formal recurrences between them. These three strategies concern: “Staging Mechanical Bodies”, where performances are enacted by anthropomorphic figures such as automata; followed by “Staging Mechanical Phenomena”, where performances included mechanisms to produce visual effects; and “Staging Natural Phenomena”, where performances focused on demonstrating scientific breakthroughs, and where human agency was mainly instrumental to the experiments.

Examples include Abbé Mical’s automatic “talking heads” (1783)<sup>81</sup>; the optic effects created by automatism in Phillip De Louthembourg’s *Eidophusikon* (1781)<sup>82</sup>; the “spectacles de decoration” of Servandoni (1738)<sup>83</sup>, Louis Daguerre’s Diorama<sup>84</sup>;

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81 The talking heads automata were presented by Mical in Marais, Paris in 1783. See for example: Gordon Ramsay, “L’Abbé Mical et les Têtes Parlantes: L’Histoire de Son Oeuvre”, HAL: *archives-ouvertes.fr*, 2010. <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00549594/>

82 *Eidophusikon* by Phillip De Louthembourg, Lisle Street, London, February 26, 1781

83 These pieces were presentations with a strong scenographic component and were presented by Servandoni at the Salle des Machines at the Tuileries between 1738-1743 and 1754-1758. See for example: Marc Olivier, “Jean-Nicolas Servandoni’s Spectacles of Nature and Technology”, *French Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2005)

84 Diorama consists of the technique of animating large screens with realistic paintings of landscapes through light effects. These presentations were performed in a theatre purposefully built

the “phantasmagorias” of Paul Philidor (1789)<sup>85</sup> and Robertson (1797); as well as the demonstrations carried out with electricity, by Stephen Gray in *Flying Boy* (1730)<sup>86</sup> and Georg Mathias Bose in *Venus Electrificata* (1740)<sup>87</sup>, and Jean Martin Charcot’s demonstrative lectures about hysteria (1882)<sup>88</sup>.

### Staging Mechanical Bodies

A relevant case of non-human acting was the staging of automata, which were mechanical assemblages of springs, strings, and cogs, engineered to perform brief and pre-determined motions. Automata were presented as technical achievements of engineering and, often, built as anthropomorphic figures, designed to simulate human appearance and behaviour.

Among different examples of anthropomorphical mechanisms<sup>89</sup>, examples of

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for presenting Dioramas, and the first theatre constructed to this purpose opened on 11 July 1822 in Paris. See for example: Erkki Huhtamo, “Transformed by the Light: The Diorama and the “Dioramas” in *Illusions on Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2013)

85 *Phantasmagoria*, by Paul de Philipsthal (pseudonym Philidor), Lyceum Theatre, London, 1802

86 *Flying Boy*, by Stephan Gray, London, April 8, 1730

87 This performance first premiered in the 1740’s in Germany. For more information, see for example: Paola Bertucci, “Sparks in the dark: the attraction of electricity in the eighteenth century”, *Endeavour*, Vol. 31 No. 3 (2007)

88 These were presented at Salpêtrière Women’s Hospice, in Paris, between 1882 and 1893. See for example: Jonathan Marshall, “Nervous Dramaturgy: Pain, Performance and Excess in the Work of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot, 1862-1893” in *Double Dialogues* (4) (2003). <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/nervous-dramaturgy-pain-performance-and-excess-in-the-work-of-dr-jean-martin-charcot-1862-1893/>

89 A famous example of automata is *The Turk*, by Wolfgang von Kempelen, Schönbrunn Palace, Austria, 1770. This was an anthropomorphic automaton, dressed as an Ottoman, sitting in front of a chess table. This automaton played chess with human players and the challenge of the player — and entertainment of the audience — was in trying to beat “the Turk”. The Turk toured extensively and was often depicted as symbol of development in the engineering of automata in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, *The Turk* was not an automaton, as it was manipulated from inside the table by a hidden human player. In this sense, it was more of a marionette and the concealment of the human inside of the marionette rather discloses an example of a human using the prosthetic body of the marionette to act. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the Turk’s inventor, Kempelen, also researched and built a machine that aimed at emulating human speech. About *The Turk*, see also, Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

An earlier example of automata appears to be found in Japan, where clockmaker and director

automata include the miniature figures built by Swiss clockmaker Pierre Jaquet-Droz who, between 1767 and 1774, engineered and presented automata that were able to draw, write or play an organ<sup>90</sup>, as well as the “talking heads” of French scientist and cleric Abbé Mical, presented in 1783. After years of research, Mical presented, in Paris, a mechanism in which two heads made of wood, mounted on a theatre-like stand, appeared to speak. This setting involved the mechanics of carrying air through a combination of airways with vibrating membranes that produced different sounds. The combination of sounds created an attempt at producing words and a dialogue in praise of Louis XVI was established between the two heads. Although staged as a theatrical interplay, the purpose of Mical’s piece was to demonstrate his method of mechanically synthesizing sounds and reproducing words and sentences of any language through a speaking machine.

Automata embodied a change in the representation of the human body brought by technology and science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — particularly, when conceiving the possibility of their autonomous action. Although they were often displayed as mechanical marvels that could perform human actions, the examples above exemplify how their anthropomorphic character and acting can be seen to surrogate human agency on stage. The uncanniness of their human resemblance, and the mystery of their autonomy, presented a potential pathway for the removal and replacement of human agency in theatre.

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Takeda Omi opened a theatre in Osaka in 1662, dedicated to performances with anthropomorphical mechanical figures, called “Karakuri Ningyuo” or “Butai Karakuri”. These automata performed characters of dramatic texts scenes accompanied by live music and, apparently, the mechanical motion of the Butai Karakuri became so popular that it influenced the way of acting of human actors in Kabuki theatre. Regarding the staging of Karakuri in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, see also Masao Yamaguchi, “Karakuri: The Ludic Relationship Between Man and Machine in Tokugawa Japan” in *Japan at Play — the Ludic and The Logic of Power* (London: Routledge, 2002) or see Kirsty Boyle, “Butai Karakuri”, *Karakuri.info*, 2008. <http://www.karakuri.info/butai/index.html>

<sup>90</sup> The three automata known as “the writer”, “the draughtsman”, and “the musician” were built by Pierre Jaquet-Droz, Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, and Jean-Frédéric Leschot and are currently housed in the Museum of Art and History of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. See, for example: Georgi Dalakov, “Pierre Jaquet-Droz”, *History of Computers*. <http://history-computer.com/Dreamers/Jaquet-Droz.html>

## Staging Mechanical Phenomena

Technology was not only used to automate human or animal-like figures but also to animate the theatrical space as a whole<sup>91</sup>. Significant examples of this staging strategy can be found in the cases of the *Eidophusikon*, of spectacles de decoration, of the diorama, of the *phantasmagoria*, and of the “Pepper’s Ghost”<sup>92</sup> visual effect.

The *Eidophusikon*, a Latin name meaning “image of nature”, was a device created by the painter and set designer Phillip De Louthembourg in 1781, and was regularly presented in a public venue in London. The *Eidophusikon* was a small-scale mechanical theatre, similar to a paper theatre, where flat boards with drawings would slide from the side over lanes, creating an effect of depth. A hidden human performer manipulated the mechanism and, in this regard, it resembled a puppet show, albeit the mechanical body being manipulated was that of a stage.

Louthembourg’s piece recreated, on a smaller scale, the “spectacles of scenery” (*spectacles de decoration*) or “machine plays”<sup>93</sup> by French set designer Giovanni Niccolo Servandoni<sup>94</sup> who produced “a series of mute spectacles at the Palace des Tuileries

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91 An ancient case can be found in the fully mechanical theatre of the Greek engineer Heron of Alexandria (c. 1st century). The automata was designed to present the myth of Nautilus in five different scenes and, as an example, it attests how early there have been attempts to mechanize theatrical acting in an autonomous way, and beyond the presence of actors. See for example: Richard Beacham, “Heron of Alexandria’s ‘Toy Theatre’ Automaton: Reality, Allusion and Illusion” in *Theatre, Performance and Analogue Technology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

92 The stage technique known as Pepper’s Ghost was created by Henry Dircks and John Henry Pepper, and applied for the first time in the staging of *The Haunted Man*, by Charles Dicke, Royal Polytechnic Institution, London, December 24, 1862. See, for example: Luckhurst, Mary and Emilie Morin (eds), *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

93 In his article “Jean-Nicolas Servandoni’s Spectacles of Nature and Technology”, scholar Marc Olivier introduces the term in this way: “Spectacular effects and changes in décor are among the key characteristics of the genre. Music was often used either to simply cover the sound of the changing stage decor, or throughout the entire performance. Mythological themes were common [...] Machine plays originally had no dancing (although this quickly changed) and had very limited singing. One of the most prolific writers of machine plays was Thomas Corneille, the younger brother of Pierre. Fontenelle, their nephew, dabbled in the genre, as did Molière.” (Olivier 2005, 44)

94 Scholar Rudolf Rasch expands on the work of Servandoni: “In 1738, Servandoni started to produce spectacles without words, of his own design. These spectacles were shown during the weeks before Easter, in March and April, when the regular theatres were closed. They were given in the Grand Théâtre (Salle des Machines) in the Palais des Tuileries. The following five spectacles can be

between 1738–1743 and 1754–1758. The plays combined the vogue for English pantomime with the breath-taking effects of the seventeenth-century machine play” (Olivier 2005, 32). These “machine plays” were presented in the famous *Salle de Machines*, a theatre at the royal Palace des Tuileries, with an unusual stage depth that made it unpractical for conventional theatre plays, but fit for visual spectacles of scenery and machines by Servandoni, who “with no concern for action or plot of any kind, [...] proposes décor as spectacle in its own right”. (*ibid.*)

Within the visual apparatus of baroque theatre, the extensive use of the stage as a space that displayed set designs and special effects diminished the space for acting accorded to actors, as well as changed their role within the overall design of the spectacle. Actors would often act in the forestage, pushed to the front of the proscenium. One might even argue that the sets absorbed their presence such that they became elements of the scenographies themselves<sup>95</sup>. It is also significant to note how, in these performances, “the dissolution of theatrical boundaries promotes a continuum between the marvellous and the real, the artificial and the natural” (Olivier 2005, 32).

This aspect of continuity between the reception of the visual spectacle and of the perception of reality was also elicited in the following examples of technological set-ups: the diorama, the phantasmagoria and the “Pepper’s Ghost” effect. The diorama evolved from the use of large “trompe l’oeil” backdrops in the theatre and offers a good example of an automated performance staging depictions of nature without human performers<sup>96</sup>.

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mentioned: 1738 *La Représentation de l’Église de Saint Pierre de Rome*; 1739 *Pandore*; 1740 *La Descente d’Enée aux Enfers*; 1741 *Les Travaux d’Ulysse*; 1742 *Léandre et Héro* [...] In contemporary sources these spectacles are called “représentations”. Knowledge about them come first of all from the librettos issued in relation to them [...] The first of these spectacles, *La Représentation de l’Église de Saint Pierre de Rome* (1738), consisted of only one “tableau”: the interior of the Saint Peter in Rome, reconstructed in the Theatre of the Tuilleries. In *Pandore* (1739) new elements were introduced: a succession of tableaux or scenes, the addition of sound and light effects, and the collaboration of pantomime actors.” (Rasch 2016, 5)

95 “In 1762 the theorist Francesco Algarotti claimed that actors performing on the *avant-scène* (forestage) destroyed the visual illusion [...] Actors were increasingly seen as elements of the scenic view. [...] The connection between the audience and the living actors [...] was challenged by situations, where the spectacle was either without human actors, or these became turned into ‘mediated’ representations” (Huhtamo 2013, 94)

96 Another interesting example is the case of the “Moving Panorama”. While Panoramas allowed for a simultaneous 360-degree view of a landscape, “Moving Panoramas” showed landscapes through successive moving images. Images were painted onto a long strip that rolled up on both ends and,

The technique of the diorama was created by French stage decorators Louis Daguerre<sup>97</sup> and Charles Marie Bouton, and presented in theatres purposefully adapted to house these particular type of shows. Dioramas were performances of light effects over large paintings, painted on both sides of linen canvas panels, and containing transparent sections. During a show, these panels were multi-layered and animated through a light design which redirected sunlight through blinds, shutters and screens. Most of the images depicted natural landscapes or general views of villages and buildings. The basic effect was of turning from day to night, but this was done in such a gradual and precise way that deemed an illusion of verisimilitude. In this way, dioramas echoed Servandoni's intention of using the set design as a spectacle of its own, a technique more focused on animating a "trompe l'oeil" through light rather than by elaborating visual effects.

However, the use of "trompe l'oeil" and of realistic depictions of nature in spectacles of visual effects during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was not only aimed at staging artistic depictions of what was visible, but also of making apparent what was invisible, as in the case of phantasmagorias or the "Pepper's Ghost" effect. The phantasmagorias, like those of Philidor (1789) or Robertson (1797), were performances based on a theatrical staging of still images that were created by projection machines such as the "Lanterna Magica" and the "Phantascope". In these shows, images were retro-projected on screens with actors often speaking in voice-over or interpreting characters. Additional effects such as light, smoke and sound were employed

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during the performance, was mounted on a pole and mechanically unrolled from one pole to another. In between, the images appeared to move in a continuous stream, while a presenter narrated a story about what was being seen — for instance a travel along a river. In this way, while the Panorama was an immersive installation of a still and mute landscape, the "Moving Panorama" aimed at presenting a show of moving images that predates cinema, by suggesting a sense of continuous motion.

97 Although Daguerre is mostly known for the invention of the daguerreotype — a technique of photographic processing — Daguerre was, in fact, a stage decorator by training and profession: "He was a student of Degotis, who was a creator of stage settings at the Paris Opera, with whom he started at the age of sixteen. He continued with Pierre Prevost (1766-1823), a specialist of panoramas. [...] While Daguerre's works exhibited in the art shows never had any big success, the sets he realized from 1817 to 1822 for shows at the the Ambigu Comique or the Opera brought him unanimous praise. [...] He then carried the art of stage setting to a fully fledged show, associating himself with another Prevost student, Charles Marie Bouton (1781-1853) to create a show by the name of Diorama. [...] He had learnt how to use a camera obscura with Prevost, who used it to prepare his huge trompe-l'œil canvases." in "Daguerre and the Invention of Photography" *Maison Nicéphore NIEPCE, Invention of Photography*. <http://www.photo-museum.org/daguerre-invention-photo/>

to portray visions of spirits with great impact on the audience. In these spectacles, the perceiving of presence — of ghosts — was un-dissociable from the means of apparition.

Another optical effect experimented in 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre was the “Pepper’s Ghost” effect. A “Pepper’s Ghost” effect occurs when an actor, hidden from the view of the audience, is illuminated in such a way that his/hers reflection appears on the surface of a glass on stage. This glass was positioned in an angle that allowed the audience to perceive the reflection of the absent performer as an image on stage<sup>98</sup>. The pale blue reflection of the actor, immaterial, and floating above the ground, suited the representation of ghosts. The potential of “Pepper’s Ghost” technical effects is its replacement of living actors with their reflections, hovering over the stage. This aspect allows seeing “Pepper’s Ghost” as a 19<sup>th</sup> century strategy of surrogacy of the actor, where actors on stage interacted with the projections of actors that were off stage, and the presence of these was enacted only through their image.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, experimenting with optical effects constituted some of the most popular examples of staging depictions of natural phenomena. Although there were cases in which the demonstration of optical effects and the projection of light constituted the main point of interest, optical effects in the theatre of this period, were more often in the service of creating special visual effects. Two of the recurrent subjects depicted in these performances were landscapes and ghosts. In this way, beyond the demonstration of optical effects, the aim of such performances was the act of making apparent (a representation of reality) or of making (invisible realities) appear.

### **Staging Natural Phenomena**

Two examples of performances where natural phenomena were publicly demonstrated are Bose’s *Venus Electrificata* (1740) and Gray’s *Flying Boy* (1730). *Flying Boy* was shown in London in 1730, and “[i]ts protagonist was an eight-year-old boy, suspended in mid-air on silk threads” (Elsenaar and Scha 2002, 17) which, after

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<sup>98</sup> This effect was also used in the “Cabaret du Néant” (c. 1890), a small theatrical entertainment in Paris where the audience could watch the dead “return” to life through a “Pepper’s Ghost” effect. In this case, the image of a real person would be progressively overlaid upon the image of a skeleton, suggesting that it was regaining its flesh and life. See, for example: “Montmartre. Le Cabaret du Néant”. *Montmartre Secret*. <http://www.montmartre-secret.com/article-montmartre-le-cabaret-du-neant-65051496.html>

being electrically charged, “attracted small particles of brass leaf through electrical induction”. (Elsenaar and Scha 2002, 18) Soon after, in Germany, Bose employed the same process in the participatory performance *Venus Electrificata* (1740). In this demonstration, couples came together for an electric kiss. The body of one of the participants was electrically charged whilst elevated from the floor. When another person, standing on the floor, approached the body of the participant being elevated — more precisely the lips — there was electrical conduction and an electrical spark discharged between their lips<sup>99</sup>. There was not only a demonstration of bodies as electrical conductors but also a staging of participation as a romantic encounter. In Bose’s *Venus Electrificata* what was a scientific demonstration became a performative experience.

Gray’s and Bose’s examples show how the staging of natural phenomena in the context of scientific demonstrations involved articulating practices of both scientific research as well as of theatrical staging. While in Gray’s example, a human body was used as conductor to demonstrate natural phenomena to the audience; Bose’s gentle electrocution of spectators takes a step further in staging the participation of the audience.

One hundred years later, the lectures of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-93) at the Salpêtrière Hospital also offer an example of demonstrations of natural phenomena that associate scientific and pedagogic purposes with elements of theatrical staging<sup>100</sup>. Charcot was a French neurologist who often presented public lectures recounting his experiments with patients of hysteria<sup>101</sup>. The studies on hysteria were

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99 Arthur Elsenaar and Remko Scha re-enacted this performance in 2009: it “is obviously a performance piece, set up for the entertainment of the onlookers. But from the point of view of the person receiving the ‘electric kiss’ it is first of all an instance of what we may call ‘immediate art’: an art experience that does not involve the perception of an external object through the senses; (but one’s own senses)” (Elsenaar and Scha 2002, 18)

100 “As Freud (1893) and others observed, Charcot’s professional status was almost entirely attributable to his role as a first-person orator and multi-media dramaturg, with even his published *Tuesday Lessons* carefully transcribed to include descriptions of stage directions and actions, quoted speech laid out as in a playscript, and so on [...] The lighting and relative position of the audience to the spectacle in both Charcot’s specially built 1882 rectangular lecture hall (the “amphitheatre”), and his rooms where he saw patients, was essentially the same. [...] Commentators observed of Charcot’s office that “The entire room and its furnishings were painted black,” like a contemporary photographic studio” (Marshall 2013).

101 “The primary symptomatic clusters which Charcot investigated included epilepsy, cholera, and Tourette’s syndrome amongst others. These were disease manifestations which could only be

complete clinical researches carried out by Charcot, and documented within a series of notes, drawings and reports, as well as through a significant photographic portfolio focused on variations of posture and facial expression. This material documented a process of diagnosis but according to Jonathan Marshall, it can also be thought of as being part of a process of dramaturgy, in which “demonstrations clearly constituted a form of theatre in their public staging of disease, pain and suffering for the purposes of pedagogy and diagnosis” (Marshall).

In the examples of Gray, Bose and Charcot, demonstrations may have had a sense of spectacle but they were, foremost, instrumental to stage the manifestation of natural phenomena. In these cases, particularly, human performers are not acting in the theatrical sense of the word and their stage presence is rather instrumental to each demonstration. Performers were primarily “conductors”, channelling<sup>102</sup> the manifestation of electricity or of a psychological condition. In this regard, they can be seen, not as actors, but as non-actors, who are staged in order to act as themselves.

An interesting 19<sup>th</sup> century example of an actor being replaced by a non-actor on the theatre stage can be found, surprisingly, in a production directed by Stanislavski, a director associated with the Naturalist theatre movement, and who became known for his ideas about acting and the training of the actor. In his writings on theatre, Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who had been an actor at the Moscow Art Theatre, recalls the story of how a non-actor was staged in this piece:

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fully described through the performance of the living patient” (Marshall 2013).

<sup>102</sup> Considering this aspect, of how performers could be seen as conducting channels, it is worth mentioning spiritualist presentations and séances, where performers named as “mediums” allegedly contacted with deceased people in front of an audience or with their collaboration. Even if these performances were mostly rehearsed, Spiritualist presentations and séances were announced, at the time, as demonstrations of physical achievements and scientific breakthroughs, rather than as artistic creations. In this regard, mediums were not introduced as actors or rehearsed performers and their performance was said to be unrehearsed and unmediated: “[a] spectacle that, despite having an underlining theatrical character, could be at the same time perceived as authentic by their sitters. [...] [this] strengthened spiritualism’s claims of authenticity by recalling the principles of automatism, creative absorption, and reverie. [...] As a medium put it, the only perfect mode of spirit communion was “wholly mechanical, and disconnected entirely from the mind of the medium” (Redman 1859, 107). This argument, supporting spiritualism’s scientific claims, was connected to the understanding of machines as objective means.” (Natale 2011, 3, 15) Theatrical séances challenged the dualism between what was “physic” and what was “psychic”, rather seeing the relation between both as continuity. In this way, séances suggested an environment of co-presence where the medium attempted to be present, not as an actor, but as a means of channelling the apparition of spirits, a medium between the invisible natural phenomena and the audience.

In his search for verisimilitude the actor of today concentrates on eliminating his “self” and tries to create an illusion of life on the stage. Why do they bother to write actors’ names on the playbills? In its production of Gorky’s *Lower Depths*, the Moscow Art Theatre brought a real tramp on to the stage in place of an actor. The pursuit of verisimilitude reached such a point that it was considered better to free the actor from the impossible task of creating a total illusion of life. Why did they print the name of the man playing Teterev on the posters? Can a man who plays himself on the stage really be called a “performer”? (Meyerhold 1991, 130)

Meyerhold starts by bringing into attention how the same “pursuit of verisimilitude” that leads actors to “eliminating” their “self”, may also lead to the withdrawal of the actor and its replacement by non-actors. His account makes apparent that the concern of Naturalist theatre in staging real life facts could have potentially led to a practice of staging real-life personas instead of professional actors.

French writer Émile Zola developed the concept of Naturalist theatre in the essay “Naturalism on the Stage” (Zola, 1894). In this essay, Zola indicated that, although Naturalism was mainly seen as a literary current, it could also be seen as a method of study and of presenting facts from real life on stage<sup>103</sup>. Accordingly, a Naturalist theatre would be a form of theatre that followed a scientific approach to studying nature<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> In “Naturalism on Stage” Zola describes the task of the naturalist writer almost as a neutral observer: “[the novelist] simply notes the material conditions in which he finds his characters at each hour, and in which the facts are produced, in order to be absolutely thorough in order that his inquiry may belong to the world’s great whole and reproduce reality in its entirety. [...] The two formulas are before us: the naturalistic formula, which makes the stage a study and a picture of real life; and the conventional formula, which makes it purely an amusement for the mind, an intellectual speculation” (Zola 1894, 152, 155).

<sup>104</sup> Analysing the influence of a scientific approach in Naturalist theatre, Kirk Williams points out that such faithful depiction of reality would blur the distinction between artistic creation and real life: “In place of traditional theatricality the Naturalists substituted scientific accuracy of observation, the precise recording of minutiae, the recording of life as it occurs ‘second-by-second’. [Naturalist’s] explicit objective was to completely remove the barrier separating theatre from life, to create an illusion so powerful that it would render the theatrical medium absolutely transparent. One must experience theatre as one experiences life itself, argued Arno Holz, seeing in the event on-stage ‘a slice of life as if one is peering through a window’ ([in] *Evolution des Dramas*, 227). The point is to replace artifice with “a near perfect reality, in other words, to drive ‘Theatre’ gradually from the theatre’ ([in]

Naturalist theatre became known as a theatrical aesthetics concerned with staging life, in the themes of its dramatic literature but also in its strategies of staging. An example of Naturalism's attention to detail was: the scenic replicas of daily-life environments, including real furniture on stage, or backdrops with realistic "tromp l'oeils"; the exclusive use of vivid realistic dialogue<sup>105</sup> rather than verse in the playwriting; and, notably, in the actor's training techniques<sup>106</sup>, mostly grounded on psychological accuracy and physical expressiveness in order to accomplish the most "natural" and spontaneous (re)presentation possible. Within this framework, the practice of imitating "life" merged into both an aim and a technique of appropriating factual realities onto stage. Imitation was not meant as a superficial mirroring but rather as a process of reflection.

Pursuing an interest in using theatre as a method to investigate reality could have potentially led Naturalist theatre makers to propose overcoming the fiction of drama: "Instead of a stage of fabrication we shall have a stage of observation" (Zola 1894, 157). Meyerhold's final question, regarding whether such person can "be called a performer", exposes how bringing "a real tramp" on stage, playing "himself", may have seemed a contradiction in terms to Meyerhold, but not necessarily one in practice. In the least, the casting of a non-actor suggests that its presence could be seen as a model for Naturalist acting: professional actors should train to perform with the quality of non-actors<sup>107</sup>. Approaching the Naturalist stage in this way — as a study

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*Vorwart*, 138)" (Williams 2007, 96).

105 "What I want to hear on stage is the language as it is spoken everyday." (Zola 1894, 154)

106 The idea of an actor's training was, in the end of the 19th century, a recent development aiming to improve acting technical skills and the research of theatre acting conventions. The concern with the training of a kind of actor who approaches acting in a methodological way was an important part of the work of directors such as Stanislavsky, Meyerhold or Étienne Decroux. The methodological approach was also an important cornerstone in the discourses of Craig and Adolphe Appia, in *L'Ouvre de Art Vivant* (Genève and Paris: Éditions Atar, 1921) regarding how rethinking theatre should be accompanied by rethinking modes of acting. In the case of the Naturalist theatre actor, the influence of psychology as a scientific method was particularly relevant to processes of interpreting a dramatic character. The scientific approach to theatre would contribute, for example, to engage with an methodological, "objective" view of social and cultural changes — such as psychological behaviours, historical developments or economic inequalities — but also to develop methodological training for actors, such as representing emotions through a psychological approach.

107 This possibility of a non-actor as model for acting offers an alternative view over the psychological approach in Naturalist acting techniques: in developing an affinity with a character based on personal emotions, an actor would not only interpret a fictional persona but primarily present its own.

of reality that ultimately stages reality itself — allows to affiliate its practices with performances such as scientific lectures and technical demonstrations that, as seen above, envisioned forms of staging natural and mechanical phenomena with actors, but also through non-actors, or by completely removing human presence on stage.

### **Conclusion: Relating Strategies**

In this section, I have given a brief account of three strategies of performing without actors, illustrated with examples of performances presented between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While there were human performers and even professional actors in many of these presentations, these aimed primarily at demonstrating scientific breakthroughs, technical achievements, mechanical prototypes and visual effects. The relation of co-presence in these performances was not narrowly confined to a human relation between actors and spectators but also between spectators and non-human actants. In providing experiences, staging experiments, and setting an experimental approach, these presentations influenced authors from the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Kleist or Maeterlinck as well as contemporary theatre makers such as Marleau or Verdonck. Furthermore, they can be seen as early practices of strategies of theatre without actors that relate with contemporary strategies namely, concerning the staging of technological automatisms and of non-actors, with a markedly artistic interest in forms of depicting nature and of staging aspects of real life.

Considering the strategies outlined in the first chapter and the three strategies forwarded in this section, it becomes possible to observe recurrences in approaches to performing without actors in the past and today. Firstly, performances of automata can be seen as early forms of staging automated bodies without actors, and performances mentioned in the subsection “Doubles”, such as Marleau’s *Les Aveugles* or Verdonck’s *Huminid*, would fall under this category. Secondly, performances that staged visual effects beyond the acting of actors can be seen as early forms of staging mechanical phenomena. This would relate with performances mentioned in the strategy “Autonomous Machines” — namely Mroué and Saneh’s *33 rpm*, Goebbels’ *Stifters Dinge*, Castellucci’s *Sacre du Printemps*, and Dorsen’s *Hello Hi There*. Thirdly, scientific and pedagogic demonstrations can be seen as early forms of staging natural phenomena beyond the presence of actors. These could be related with performances mentioned in the strategies “Staging Natural Phenomena” and “Staging Non-Actors”, such as Verdonck’s *Shell or Box*, as well as Naumann’s *Factory* and Rimini Protokoll’s *Chácara Paraíba*.

In this way, I have shown how these three performing strategies developed alternative modes of agency in theatre, namely, concerning the presence of human performers or professional actors. Those presentations can be seen as historical examples where the staging of automata, visual effects and non-actors implied derision or absenting of professional and human acting, even if they do not explicitly lead to discourses about absenting the actor in theatre. In the next section, I discuss examples of discourses that explicitly address absenting the actor and I show how these allow grounding the issue of theatre without actors as a logic development in modern theatre history.

## Absenting the Actor: Looking for the Nature of the Medium

### **Introduction: From Kleist to Kantor**

The first time I considered that there was a history of theatre without actors was after reading Tadeusz Kantor's manifesto "The Theatre of Death" (Kantor 1993), in which the Polish director reflects on the links between Heinrich von Kleist, the Symbolists and Edward Gordon Craig around the idea of removing the actor from stage. Written as reflection about the performance *The Dead Class* (1975)<sup>108</sup>, and part of a wider series of artistic manifestos, what initially drew my attention in "The Theatre of Death" was the title of the first part: "1. Craig's Postulate: to bring back the marionette. Eliminate the live actor. Man — a creature of nature — is a foreign intrusion into the abstract structure of a work of art" (Kantor 1993, 106). Kantor openly assumes that Craig proposed the removal of the actor. Furthermore, he believes that this idea was not Craig's alone but that it had evolved from ideas forwarded by Kleist or the Symbolists, and in relation to the Avant-garde movement.

Craig, inspired by the aesthetics of SYMBOLISM, considered man, who is driven by unpredictable emotions and passions and consequently by chance, as an element which is completely foreign to the homogeneous nature and structure of the work of art and which destroys its principal trait: cohesion. [...] One hundred years earlier, Kleist, for the same reasons as Craig,

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<sup>108</sup> *The Dead Class*, by Tadeusz Kantor, Krzytofory Gallery, Krakow, November 15, 1975.

demanded the substitution of the actor by the marionette; he regarded the human organism, which is subject to the laws of NATURE, as a foreign intrusion into Artistic Fiction, based on the principle of Construction and Intellect. (Kantor 1993, 107)

In this way, although the manifesto “The Theatre of Death” is not a text urging for performances without actors, it does forward an earlier alignment of historic references where it proposed to withdraw the actor. The outlining of such lineage has the potential to inscribe the idea of absenting actors in modern theatre history. It was this suggestion of a lineage of discourses about the possibility of removing actors from stage that inspired me to research further about a genealogy of theatre without actors.

In this way, and following Kantor’s suggestion, I engage in this chapter with texts written between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that discuss the absenting of the actor, namely: “On the Marionette Theatre” (Kleist 1972), “On The Tragedies of Shakespeare” (Lamb 1977), “Un Théâtre d’Androïdes” (Maeterlinck 1989) “The Actor and the Über-Marionette” (Craig 1908), “Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere” (Prampolini 1971), “Man and Art Figure” (Schlemmer 1971) and “Theater, Circus, Variety” (Moholy-Nagy 1971). The approach allows for widening the spectre of references about the absenting of the actor in theatre and showing the specificities in the motives and means of each case.

I discuss these texts in three different thematic sections, each time in chronological order: firstly, in “Inadequacy of the Actor: Dissociating Actors From Acting”, I consider a recurrent anti-theatricalist<sup>109</sup> criticism about the ways of acting of actors and also a discomfort with their sheer physical presence; secondly, in “Lack of Life:

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109 By “anti-theatricalist” I refer here to the feeling of resistance and criticism to theatre that was embedded in propositions concerning the withdrawal of the actor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — as it will be referred to in this chapter. For an account of anti-theatricalism see, for example, Ackerman and Puchner’s edited volume *Against Theatre – Creative Destructions on the Modernist stage*: “Twenty years ago, Jonas Barish identified a disposition within Western culture that he termed the anti-theatrical prejudice. He cites instances, from the Greeks to the present, of a bias against the expressive, the imitative, the deceptive, the spectacular and the subject that arouses, or even acknowledges, an audience. [...] This volume argues that Barish’s trans-historical notion of anti-theatricalism and, by extension, of the theatre is in need of a number of revisions. [...] This book argues that anti-theatricalism always emerges in response to a specific theatre and, by extension, that the modernist form of anti-theatricalism attacks not theatre itself but the value of theatricality that arose in [...] the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Ackerman and Puchner 2007, 2).

Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Actors”, I depart from that criticism in order to observe what kind of surrogates were envisioned to replace the actor in acting, in particular, the anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic figurations in the strategies involved; and, thirdly, in “Natures of Theatre: Autonomy Without Actors”, I address how the absencing of the actor, and the staging of alternative strategies of acting, served the purpose of reinforcing an essentialist view of theatre as an artificial art form. According to this view, theatre would be more autonomous and methodical as it becomes more independent from the interference of human will and affects.

The following section demonstrates how the issue of absencing the actor from stage has been an important part in reflections about the definition of theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Furthermore, it shows that the issue of absencing actors was motivated by ambiguous aims: while it served the purpose of asserting the possibility of an autonomous view of theatre beyond the interference of humans, it also revealed the urgency of reforming the strategies of acting by actors and, in that sense, reinforce a view of theatre where actors are an indispensable aspect of its definition.

### **Inadequacy of the Actor: Dissociating Actors from Acting**

An early contribution demanding the dismissal of human presence from stage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is found in Heinrich Von Kleist’s (1777–1811) “On the Marionette Theatre”. Written in 1810, the short story consists of a dialogue between the narrator and a dancer, inquiring about how movements unaffected by human will should be seen as being more spontaneous and “natural” — that is, in accordance with nature. It is in this way that Kleist approaches dance as a practice of movement affected by human will while, on the contrary, he views marionettes as a practice of movement unaffected by will. Accordingly, and through the fictional character of the dancer, Kleist expresses that, perhaps, only a human-size marionette would be able to dance unaffected by human will. He argues that, therefore, marionettes are more capable of representing nature’s grace than human performers. In the dialogue, the dancer claims that the most perfect performer is a marionette, because the mechanism of a marionette is not constricted by human affection. According to Kleist’s character, affection happens when “the soul (*vis motrix*) locates itself at any point other than the centre of gravity of the movement.” (Kleist 1972, 24). This dislocation from the centre of movement is created by the dancer’s will and affects a motion that would, otherwise, follow the mechanical laws of nature. In a marionette, the “centre

of intention” coincides with the “centre of movement”, as limbs and body parts are “dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity” (*ibid.*). Marionettes move un-intentionally, making movements spontaneous and graceful because “the spirit cannot err where it does not exist” (*ibid.*). Accordingly, it is because of the unaffected motion that dancers should look to the marionette as a model for dancing:

And the advantage such a puppet would have over a living dancer? The advantage? First a negative gain, [...] such a figure would never be affected. [...] therefore all the other limbs are what they should be — dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers. (Kleist 1972, 24)

Kleist’s argument that only a marionette could move according to nature implies an association between an idea of “natural” (movement) and an idea of “mechanical” (body of the marionette). Kleist seems to acknowledge mechanical movement as a kind of natural movement because it follows the laws of nature. Differently, the human performer is seen as resisting the manifestation of natural movement and, accordingly, ruled out as an appropriate body to convey a way of performing that is graceful, spontaneous and unaffected. Through the figure of the marionette, Kleist expressed an ideal and a model for dancing: performing dis-passionately. The aim of the text seems to reside in outlining the idea of “grace” as a mode of spontaneity that is liberated from self-awareness and in accordance with nature’s laws. The marionette is presented as a proper performer in the sense that its movements are not ruled by human intention but by natural causes, such as gravity. The mechanism is seen as a body that moves spontaneously, that is, freed from the affection of conscious will, a kind of affection proper of humans. In this way, following Kleist’s argument, mechanical movement is a manifestation of natural motion, in the sense that movement is only determined by physics, such as by the rules of gravity. Even if it is made and manipulated by humans, a marionette’s “anima” is a kind of mechanical motion that is seen as a natural phenomenon.

At the time when Kleist pointed to the limitations of human dancers to perform graceful movements, Charles Lamb exposed the limitations of actors in performing fictional characters. Lamb (1775–1834) was an English writer and essayist who researched and wrote extensively about Shakespeare’s works and period. The text “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for

Stage Representation”, was first published in 1811 in the magazine *Reflector*<sup>110</sup>. In this essay, Lamb reflects on how Shakespeare’s plays have a stronger power of suggestion when they are read, than when they are staged — that is, their power of suggestion is stronger in describing fictional places, actions and characters, rather than when being enacted on stage. According to Lamb, the material reality of theatre tends to corrupt Shakespeare’s plays because, he argues, they are primarily poems rather than dramatic texts<sup>111</sup>. An example of such corruption can be found in acting. Lamb observes:

On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear. (Lamb 1977, 45)

And:

I am not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted. (*ibid*, 38)

Lamb’s remarks point in the direction of “a form of resistance” to theatre, an “anti-theatricalism” as “process that is dependent on that which it negates” (Puchner 2002, 2). Accordingly, the kind of “theatricalism” that seems to be criticized is that which refers to the materiality of theatre, namely, a staging process that transforms a dramatic play into a live event, in association with physical aspects such as set design and human actors. Lamb’s claim that the act of reading preserves better the integrity of the dramatic character than if this character was staged implies two consequences: on the one hand, given that characters are “made another thing by being acted”, the limitations and “corporeal infirmities” of staging destroy the fantasy suggested by the literary text; on the other hand, this implies that an actor is not

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<sup>110</sup> The original title was “Theatralia No I: On Garrick, and Acting; and the Plays of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation”. The passage in the title mentioning “On Garrick” refers to British actor David Garrick, famous for his enacting of roles of Shakespeare’s characters.

<sup>111</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the essays “Shakespeare and No End (1813 - 1816)” in *Criticisms, Reflections, and Maxims of Goethe*, (London: Walter Scott, 1900) expresses similar views to Lamb regarding the inadequacy of the actor when staging Shakespeare texts but without the consequences of criticizing the physical presence of actors.

fit to interpret literary characters and it is the reader who has the ability to “become” the character. Lamb’s reasoning indicates that the possibility of theatre without actors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not only drawn from a sense of inadequacy of the performer’s acting (as in Kleist’s account), but from a wider sense of inadequacy of the practice of staging texts per se.

[in the theatre] it is not what the character is, but how he looks; not what he says, but how he speaks it. [...] Contrary to the old saying that “seeing is believing,” the sight actually destroys the faith. (Lamb 1977, 48)

Lamb is not criticizing particular conventions or techniques of acting but, more fundamentally, the practice of staging itself. In his view, the material reality of staging overrides the construed make-believe. The gap between dramatic literature and theatrical staging can only be overcome in two ways: either by assuming that a text is unfit to be staged and is only suited for the readers’ imagination, i.e. a “theatre of the mind;” or by disposing of the embodiment of characters by actors so that theatre can preserve the suggestiveness of the text. The first consequence can be further unfolded in two manners, as I show below: firstly, as “closet drama” plays, a tendency observed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and secondly, in the surrogating of the human actor, as analysed specifically by Maeterlinck.

“Closet drama” or, in French, “théâtre du fauteuil”, from Alfred de Musset’s *Un Spectacle dans un Fauteuil* (Musset 1833), refers to dramatic plays written to be “read-only”. In “closet dramas” the practice of reading was constituted as performative practice. Accordingly, a dramatic text would not be written to be staged to an audience in a theatre, but to be read individually. In this way, the fiction would not be bounded by the material constraints related to staging, such as the set design, an actor’s physical figure, or its way of acting. In fact, this dissociation from staging allowed thinking about elements such as the number of characters, the change of scenery, or the duration between acts in a much more flexible and imaginative way. In this regard, “[Stéphane Mallarmé claimed] ‘the book will suffice to open up the interior stage and whisper its echoes’ whilst, in *Revue Wagnérienne*, Tédor de Wyzema’s stated that ‘a play read will appear to delicate souls more alive than the same play performed on stage by living actors’” (McGuinness 2007, 152).

In this way, “closet drama” makes apparent an important distinction happening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between dramatic literature and theatrical staging — which, until then, had not been established. This distinction allows the separation between

the staging of fictional characters and the performance of acting by actors: fictional characters do not have to necessarily be staged through actors. In his study about “closet drama”, Martin Puchner remarks how this withdrawal of the dramatic text from stage implied an “attack on the individual and human nature of the actor” (Puchner 2002, 15):

here it is language, in the form of a closet drama, that responds to and even “solves” what then might be called the crisis of the living actor. What is more remarkable, perhaps, than this reversal is the fact that theatricalism and anti-theatricalism here meet once more in their shared attack on the individual and human nature of the actor. While Craig demanded that the actor be replaced by a marionette, many writers of lyrical dramas either wrote plays for marionettes, as did Maeterlinck, or fantasized about having their plays performed by marionettes, as did Hofmannsthal. In the case of Mallarmé, Joyce, and Stein, however, no reference to an actual replacement of the human actor is necessary to bring about a complete depersonalization of the human figure, for they employ modes of textual representation that explicitly foreclose any act of impersonation. (Puchner 2002, 15-16)

Puchner remarks that, while a number of authors urged for the replacement of the actor, that was not the case with “closet drama”. Instead, the potential of reading dramatic literature dismissed the practice of staging as a whole, including the performance of actors. “Closet drama” was an artistic form consequent to Lamb’s essay but, as seen above, a second consequence would be that the suggestiveness of the text could be staged in theatre if one dispenses with the embodiment of characters by actors. Maeterlinck further explored this line of argumentation in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1890, Maeterlinck’s essay “Un Théâtre d’Androïdes” was originally published in “Menu Propos: Le Théâtre”, a section of the magazine *La Jeune Belgique*. This essay resembles in many ways a manifesto, namely, in the urgency of its tone, in the setting of large claims and in outlining demands. A considerable part of the text concentrates on analysing Lamb’s arguments regarding the inadequacy of the living actor in representing dramatic poetry on stage. Like Lamb, Maeterlinck doesn’t consider the absenting of the actor as an aim in itself, but as a consequence of an aesthetic positioning, namely, that art works are artificial and methodological creations, where only inanimate beings are fitting to such an artificial environment. Departing from

Lamb's argument, Maeterlinck claims that human presence corrupts the artificial condition of art works, deeming the absencing of the performer as indispensable:

Maybe it is necessary to completely withdraw the living being from stage. It is not said we won't return to an art of ancient centuries, where the masks of the tragic Greeks still bear the last traces. Will it be one day the use for sculpture, of which we start to pose strange questions? The human being will be replaced by a shadow, a projection of symbolical forms or a being, having the appearance of life, without being alive? I don't know; but the absence of man seems to me to be indispensable. (Maeterlinck 1985, 86)

Maeterlinck is likely the first author within the field of theatre who seriously envisioned the possibility of removing the actor from stage. Maeterlinck's explicit appeal for a theatre without actors can be compared with the views of Lamb and Kleist. Although each author developed different consequences from a common departing point, they all developed arguments leading to an absencing of the actor. For Kleist, the absencing of the performer served the purpose of arguing for an art practice liberated from human will, eventually advocating for a mechanical surrogate. For Lamb, however, the withdrawal of the actor was mostly a consequence of reasoning about readership as theatrical, further implying a distinction between character and actor. Finally, Maeterlinck's view incorporates Lamb's account about dissociating actors from acting characters, while seeming to relate with Kleist's view about surrogating humans by inanimate beings.

These ideas can be recognized also in Craig's essay "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" first published in 1908. Craig (1872–1966) was an English director, set designer and author, whose contributions to theatre theory, stage design and acting were seminal to the field of theatre and a major influence to both authors and theatre makers in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" Craig departs from criticizing how theatre acting is disturbed by ways of acting which are too affected by human emotions and personal will, rather than by training and technique. In this regard, Craig indicates that the actor should become less human, he should become something in-between machine or matter:

if you could make your body into a machine, or into a dead piece of material such as clay, and if it could obey you in every moment for the entire space of time it was before the audience, and if you could put aside Shakespeare's poem — you would be able to make a work of art out of that which is in you. [...] and that which you had executed could be repeated time after time. (Craig 1908, 8)

Further developing the argument that actors should look at inanimate and mechanical bodies as models for acting, Craig forwards the figure of the Über-Marionette to exemplify, in his view, the most advanced model for acting and, in that regard, preferable to human acting. Without being explicit about absenting the actor, Craig clearly synthesizes previous claims and issues, namely, Maeterlinck's idea of staging artificial performers (given the artificial nature of theatre), and Lamb and Kleist's critiques against the affection of human acting and, notably, the latter's formulation of a life-sized marionette as surrogate of the living performer. However, Craig was not explicit about whether the Über-Marionette was to be seen as an exemplary of acting to actors or, differently, as an example of theatre without actors. This ambiguity was met with criticism, apparently leading Craig to state that the Über-Marionette should be seen as "the actor plus fire and minus egoism"<sup>112</sup>. In this way, Craig's essay became mostly read as an account supporting the reform of acting techniques and, in this sense, seen as reinforcement of the agency of the human actor, rather than about its radical absenting.

My last example, Enrico Prampolini's essay "Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere", shows that the idea of absenting the actor was motivated by a perceived sense of inadequacy of the presence and acting of human performers in theatre. Prampolini (1894–1956) was an Italian visual artist and set designer who was part of the Futurist group. The manifesto "Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere", originally published in 1915, argued for expanding the visual and spatial elements of theatrical scenography, refusing the staging of literary drama, and radicalizing a shift towards a scenic approach of theatre performance<sup>113</sup>. According to this view, the actor should be removed.

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<sup>112</sup> "In the 1924 preface to the new edition of *On the Art of Theatre*, Craig made what is considered his retraction: "I no more want to see the living actors replaced by things of wood than the great Italian actress of our day [Duse] wants all the actors to die. . . The Über-marionette is the actor plus fire, minus egoism: the fire of the gods and demons, without the smoke and steam of mortality" (Eynat-Confino 1987, 185).

<sup>113</sup> Within this framework, the replacement of the actor is not an end in itself, but one of the necessary consequences of a triangulation of ideas (assembling ideas of synthesis, plasticity

In the traditional and anti-traditional theatre of today, the actor is always considered a *unique and indispensable element* dominating theatrical action. The most recent theoreticians and maestros of the contemporary theatre, like Craig, Appia and Tairov, have disciplined the function of the actor and diminished his importance. Craig defines him as a *spot of colour*; Appia, establishes a hierarchy between *author, actors and space*; Tairov considers him as an object, that is to say, like one of many elements in a scene.

I consider the actor as a *useless element* in theatrical action, and, moreover dangerous to the future of the theatre. The actor is the element of interpretation that presents the greatest knowns and the smallest guarantees. Whereas the *scenic conception* of a theatrical production represents an absolute scenic transposition, the actor always represents a *relative viewpoint*. (Prampolini 1971, 229-230)

Prampolini's initial motivation for the removal of the actor is grounded in a perceived sense of inadequacy of the physical presence of the actor within the artificial and autonomous medium of theatre. In this regard, his view can be aligned with Kleist, Lamb and Maeterlinck. However, Prampolini goes further to propose an appropriation of the idea of theatrical action, aiming for a sort of acting predominately determined by visual, material and spatial dynamics. The agency of the actor is questioned and his physical living presence preferably dismissed: "Therefore, I consider that the intervention of the actor in the theatre as an element of interpretation is one of the most absurd compromises in the art of theatre [...] The appearance of the human element shatters the mystery of the beyond" (Prampolini 1971, 230).

One of the main reasons behind proposing the idea of theatre without actors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a perceived sense of inadequacy about the actor on stage. To continue developing this line of thought, I address the strategies and figures that were envisioned to "act" in the theatre, in the place of the human actor. As it will be shown, these surrogates were anthropomorphic figures but, significantly, there were also non-anthropomorphic ways of thinking about theatrical agency historically.

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and dynamics), which ultimately constitutes a "polidimensional" scenic space. "Rhythm" can be attained by motion, colour and sound. It is a crucial step in the progress from a two dimensional "scenosynthesis" towards a four-dimensional "scenodynamics." Within a graduation in which the dynamics of spatiality is the core element of the theatrical, the unpredictability of the human action is disruptive. See Prampolini 1971, 227-228.

### **Lack of Life: Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Actors**

As indicated above, Kleist and Craig proposed life-sized mechanical marionettes that should be looked upon as inspirational models of acting for human actors. Marionettes, instead of actors, are more fitting performers to act in accordance with the artificial character of theatre. By privileging the plain physical movement of mechanics over human affects in performance, Kleist indicates that marionettes can be regarded by human dancers as a model of performance. He also envisions the possibility of replacing the human performer by an inanimate automaton.

this final trace of the [human] intellect could eventually be removed from the marionettes, so that their dance could pass entirely over into the world of the mechanical and be operated by means of a handle [...] he dared to venture that a marionette constructed by a craftsman according to his requirements could perform a dance that neither he nor any other outstanding dancer of his time, not even Vestris himself, could equal. (Kleist 1972, 23)

The marionette would be able to dance incomparably better than humans because it lacks human will, and its movement is determined exclusively by the natural causes of physics and mechanics. In this way, the marionette would act in accordance with its own nature — being what makes them a “model”. Kleist’s account of how a marionette could be a better performer than humans relates with Craig’s proposal of the Über-Marionette one hundred years later<sup>114</sup>. Although the Über-Marionette is Craig’s most notable proposition of a model for human acting, it follows an early account of Craig’s thoughts about absenting the actor, found in his formulation of the Kinetic Stage<sup>115</sup> in 1909. The Kinetic stage was a form of setting and using mobile screens

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<sup>114</sup> In Kleist and Craig’s vision, the marionette is not only an ideal of performance but also a sort of idol, that is, a being that makes present an other-worldly realm: in Kleist’s case, the realm of nature; and in Craig’s case, a spiritual realm. In his essay, Craig introduces the Über-Marionette as an oversized, still puppet, which is worshiped as an idol. Craig tells of its existence in ancient times, and of how the admiration and envy of humans led these to imitate the idol; first through the use of mask, then with their own faces and bodies, as if idols themselves. With the Über-Marionette Craig urged for a stylized mode of acting. However, Craig also points to a step beyond, demanding a relationship of idolatry with the inanimate, symbolical marionette.

<sup>115</sup> “Craig, was not entirely satisfied with these rather frozen scenes, and became concerned with the mobility of the stage. From 1906 onwards he created a kinetic stage, in which a changing space became an ‘actor’. Accompanied by light and sound, the stage itself generated movement.” (Haas 2009, 48).

and rectangular blocks on stage that, despite being designed for performances with actors, intended to explore the visual potential of their mobility and their playful texturing of light and colours. To Craig, this way of thinking about what was acting in the theatre was the culmination of a process of dematerialization.

That which has to go is once more written down & the order in which its parts have to go are indicated. The thing — the artificial — and as assisting towards artificiality, the human material.

The order

1. The woman or actress (Boys)
2. The human face & form (masks)
3. The artificial time and light (day)
4. The Play (Ceremony)
5. The spoken word (song, written words)
6. Man

Finally what remains — Light — shadow — motion through unpersonal mediums — and silence. (Craig, quoted in Eynat-Confino 1987, 167)

The order of exclusion noted in this quote demonstrates a strategy of reduction of scenic elements, a process of dematerialization of the theatrical stage, which aims towards discarding human living presence<sup>116</sup>. In front of each of the “parts (which) have to go”, Craig enunciates its replacement: boys replace women, masks replace the human face, theatrical time and light are replaced by continuous time and daylight, the dramatic play is replaced by the ceremony, and words become part of music. The last figure, “man”, is not replaced by anything. Rather, Craig indicates that what subsists is light, shadows, and things moving in silence. In this framework, the Über-Marionette is but a step in a gradual reduction of theatrical elements and a dematerialization of human presence. Seen in this way, both the ideas of the Über-Marionette and the idea of Kinetic stage stem from identical aesthetic programs rather than iso-

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<sup>116</sup> It is odd that Craig enumerate steps towards a last stage where the human is absented, but that he identifies the human as “Man”, after indicating the replacement of “Woman” by younger man as the first of all steps. Given that these steps don’t describe only exclusion but mostly replacements, it is possible that Craig was referring to an earlier strategy of having younger men replacing women in female roles, in contexts where women were forbidden to act in theatre plays. Nevertheless, the distinction feels discriminatory and an anachronism.

lated propositions. In this frame, absenting the actor works as an axis that connects both ideas.

Do away with the real tree, do away with the reality of delivery, do away with the reality of action, and you tend towards the doing away with the actor. [...] Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. [...] The actor must go and in his place comes the inanimate figure — the Über-marionette. [...] The Über-Marionette will not compete with life — rather it will go beyond it. [...] It will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit. Several times in the course of this essay has a word or two about Death found its way on to the paper – called there by the incessant clamouring of “Life! Life! Life!” which the realists keep up. (Craig 1908, 11, 12)

Craig describes the inanimate being of the Über-Marionette through a contrast between “death” and “life”: that which holds the appearance of being “dead” is, however, animated by a “living spirit”. By putting forth the word “death” to oppose the use of the word “life” by “realists”, Craig sought for a separation between his view and the imitation of reality in theatre<sup>117</sup>. The idea of “death” as expressing the contrary of the imitation of “life” was also underlying Maeterlinck’s argument. For Maeterlinck, theatre was defined by artificiality — there should be no place to stage aspects of real life or natural phenomena<sup>118</sup>. On the contrary, inanimate beings were seen as the most appropriate performers of theatrical action.

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<sup>117</sup> The idea of “lack of life” was formulated by Kleist, Maeterlinck and Craig in ways that evoked the Platonic theory of archetypes: “death” signified a threshold beyond which there could live eternal forms and ideas, existing autonomously and apart from the corruption of organic life — hence the perception of anthropomorphic effigies as standing in between two realms, as sacred figures or ghosts. In this way, the idea of death implies the making of a claim: that there is a way by which theatre can be independent and autonomous, when resisting to the interference of aspects of life as, for instance, human will and affections.

<sup>118</sup> It can be interesting to align this statement with Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” in *The Decay of Lying: and Other Essays*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), where Wilde advocates for lying as a practice that opposes to the ideal of truth in art. Through the idea of lying, Wilde positioned himself against realism in art arguing that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life”. (Wilde 2010, 10). Wilde’s account reinforces a view about the autonomy of art in the 19th century — indicated above by Kleist, Lamb and Maeterlinck — expressed in terms of oppositions such as between nature and artifice, reality and fiction, human presence and inanimate surrogates.

Man can not speak except in his name, and has no right to speak on behalf of a multitude of dead. [...] on stage, aimlessly beings, whose identity would never erase the heroes. It also seems that any being that has the appearance of life without life, must appeal to extraordinary powers. (Maeterlinck 1989, 87)

The withdrawal of the human allows the acknowledgement of the presence of inanimate beings. Following this idea, Maeterlinck referred to the use of mannequins as possible surrogates of actors: “Extraordinary powers” emanate from *aimless beings* he argues, because they bear “the appearance of life without life”<sup>119</sup>. Maeterlinck viewed inanimate beings as the only ones with the “right to speak on behalf of a multitude of dead”. In this way, using surrogates of actors, such as mannequins, allowed for the presentation of inanimate bodies devoid of will and aims, and highlighted a contrast between their apparently living presence and their inane materiality.

The idea of theatre as art form defined by the artificiality of its means influenced theatre artists beyond Maeterlinck and Craig. In the following, I show how, in the particular cases of Prampolini, Oskar Schlemmer and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, this view informed a criticism against the presence of the actor, and influenced ideas on alternative acting subjects. However, as it will be demonstrated, in the views of these authors, the absencing of the actor was not meant to oppose a condition of artificial against natural, or of death against life. Rather, the absencing of the actor allowed for them to deepen reflections on the materialities of the medium of theatre, such as the theatrical space, the body in costume, and the audio-visual experience.

Prampolini explicitly claims for a replacement of “the human actor [by] a new scenic individuality of the actor-space” (Prampolini 1971, 230-31). The notion of

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<sup>119</sup> In “The Theatre of Death”, Kantor reformulates Maeterlinck’s expression “Its emergence [dummy] is compatible with this increasingly strong conviction on me that life can only be expressed by the lack of life and use of DEATH, to APPEARANCES, the EMPTY and the absence of any MESSAGE. In my theater, a DUMMY must become a MODEL embodying and conveying a powerful sense of DEATH and the condition of the dead - the Model for ACTOR alive” (Kantor 1993, 112). The idea of absencing actors was instrumental for Kantor to argue for his conceptualization of the idea of “death” as an aesthetic approach to theatre. Different from Maeterlinck and Craig, Kantor’s account of “death” is far more concrete and less idealistic. Often revisiting memories from the Second World War, Kantor’s theatre was of “death” because it staged a tension between presence and memory. Rather than crossing that threshold of “death” towards archetypal art forms, Kantor preferred to keep his theatre at the threshold, where living human actors cohabited with inanimate beings, such as wax mannequins that resembled actors onstage, or through what Kantor termed as “poor objects”, worn objects that were repurposed on stage.

“actor-space” does not refer to a new form of acting or to an anthropomorphic surrogate of the human actor. Rather, “actor-space” describes an attribution of the properties of human acting into theatrical space, a process described by Prampolini as “personification of space”:

The personification of space, in the role of the actor, as a dynamic and interacting element between the scenic environment and the public spectator, constitutes one of the most important conquests for the evolution of art and of theatrical technique, since the problem of *scenic unity* is definitely solved.

Considering *space* as a *scenic individual* dominating theatrical action and the elements agitating it as accessories, it is evident that this *scenic unity* is attained by the *synchronism* between the dynamics of the *scenic environment* and the dynamics of the *actor-space* at play in the rhythmic succession event of the scenic atmosphere. (Prampolini 1971, 230)

By replacing the actor with a scenographic “dynamism”, Prampolini’s intention was to delegate the figuration of subjectivity from the human actor to the contained theatrical space. His precise description of what would be delegated from the actor into space reveals what should precisely be exerted by the actor: the “function” of being a mediator between the public and the play, an “interferential dynamic element of expression between the scenic environment and the public spectators”. Through the notion of “actor-space” and of “personification of space”, Prampolini makes explicit what is gained from absencing the actor: the absorption of its mediating function by the scenic “atmosphere”, the “environment”; that is, the medial apparatus of the performance.

The contributions of Schlemmer and of Moholy-Nagy are in line with Prampolini’s work, and can be found in *The Theatre of the Bauhaus* (Gropius 1971), originally published in 1925. The book is composed of a series of essays written by artists and teachers of Bauhaus and was edited by Walter Gropius, the director of the school at the time. Two essays relate to the issue of theatre without actors, namely: “Man and Art Figure” by Schlemmer and “Theater, Circus, Variety” by Moholy-Nagy. I observe each of these texts separately.

Schlemmer (1888-1943) was a visual artist, set designer and teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar. At the Bauhaus, Schlemmer experimented with strategies of staging the human body influenced by abstract forms. This resulted in pieces in which the performer’s faces were masked, the shapes of human bodies were altered

by geometry, and their motion was modified accordingly. Bodies on stage were de-humanized, resembling marionettes, as well as shifting shapes and matter in motion. Among other pieces, this line of work was consolidated in the *Triadic Ballet* (1922)<sup>120</sup> where a cast of performers are seen “activating” a number of visual forms, colours and textures with their motion and dance.

In the essay “Man and Art Figure”, Schlemmer revisits his artistic processes and states his vision regarding theatre as “transfiguration”. The history of theatre, he argues, is the history of transfiguration of the human form (Schlemmer 1971, 17). His work investigates this process and, in line with the aesthetic and technological changes of the period, attempts to transfigure the human presence by means of abstraction, stylization and mechanics.

Either abstract space is adapted in deference to natural man and transformed back into nature or the imitation of nature. This happens in the theater of illusionistic realism. Or natural man, in deference to abstract space, is recast to fit its mold. This happens on the abstract stage. (Schlemmer 1971, 22-23)

Further in the text, Schlemmer outlines how, for instance, the costume or the mask can be a strategy to transfigure the presence of the performer, as well as, the visual and scenic possibilities of the stage. Initially, Schlemmer admits that the actor “[f]rom the standpoint of material [...] has the advantages of immediacy and independence.” (Schlemmer 1971, 28). However, there are concrete limits to what the human body can achieve. In Schlemmer’s argument, these interpretative constraints are the departing point from which to claim the replacement of the *organic* with the “mechanical”:

The endeavour to free man from his physical bondage and to heighten his freedom of movement beyond his native potential resulted in substituting for the organism the mechanical human figure (Kunstfigur): the automaton and the marionette. E. T. A. Hoffmann extolled the first of these, Heinrich von Kleist the second. The English stage reformer Gordon Craig demands: “The actor must go, [...] And the Russian Brjusov demands that we “replace actors with mechanized dolls, into each of which a phonograph shall be built.” Such, indeed, are two actual conclusions arrived at by the stage designer whose

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<sup>120</sup> *Triadic Ballet*, by Oskar Schlemmer, Stuttgart, Germany, 1922

mind is constantly concerned with form and transformation, with figure and configuration. As far as the stage is concerned, such paradoxical exclusiveness is less significant than the enrichment of modes of expression which is brought about by it. (Schlemmer 1971, 28)

Schlemmer observes an affiliation between Kleist and Craig's essays, aligning his thoughts alongside their critique of the presence of the human actor. Furthermore, it is possible to understand Schlemmer's abstract figures in a lineage of inanimate beings such as Hoffman's automata, Kleist and Craig's life-sized marionettes or even the speaking mannequins proposed by Russian writer Valery Bryusov<sup>121</sup>. However, Schlemmer differs from these authors because he refrains from questioning particular modes of acting of human actors. Rather, like Kleist, Schlemmer considered the theatrical acting of human performers per se to be limited in comparison to the possibilities that technological means offered. In this way, Schlemmer's focus is much more oriented towards what is gained in terms of "enrichment of modes of expression" from the absencing of the actor, rather than what is lost by it. As he states, the surrogating of the living actor by a "mechanical human figure" is a consequential step for the "stage designer whose mind is constantly concerned [...] with figure and configuration"<sup>122</sup>.

A similar approach is developed in Moholy-Nagy's account of a synthesis between mechanics and media. Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) was a Hungarian visual artist and a teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar. In "Theater, Circus, Variety", Moholy-Nagy describes what he terms as the "Theatre of Totality", appealing to an understanding of stagecraft through an investigation of creative media beyond the presence of the actor.

[The living human actor] is no longer to be pivotal — as he is in traditional theater—but is to be employed ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH THE OTHER FORMATIVE MEDIA. [...] Man as coactor is not necessary, since in one day

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<sup>121</sup> In "L'Acteur en Effigie", Plassard mentions that Valery Bryusov's intention was, in fact, mocking the idea of replacing actors by mechanical surrogates (Plassard 1992, 59).

<sup>122</sup> "Seen from this perspective, it might even be predicted that the situation will completely reverse itself: the stage designer will develop optical phenomena and will then seek out a poet who will give them their appropriate language through words and musical sounds." (Schlemmer 1971, 29)

equipment can be constructed which is far more capable of executing the purely mechanical role of man than man himself. (Moholy-Nagy 1971, 57, 60)

In this framework, elements such as “SOUND, COLOR (LIGHT), MOTION, SPACE” are considered alongside “FORM (OBJECTS AND PERSONS)” (*ibid.*, 49). Moholy-Nagy indicates that light, in the forms of colour or cinema, as well as sounds effects and machines can be seen as sets of “complex apparatus” (*ibid.*, 67). Similarly to Prampolini, he points out that non-anthropomorphic strategies of theatrical acting are as important as human actors and, in fact, are able to overcome their “mechanical role”. In overcoming anthropomorphism as a solution to surrogate the human actor, Moholy-Nagy, Prampolini (and even Craig or Lamb) focus on “other formative media” in theatre. They envision ways of acting that are not centred on the human figure — living or inanimate — but on the relation between material elements on stage. This view contrasts with the anthropomorphic strategies of the marionettes of Kleist and Craig or of the mannequins proposed by Maeterlinck.

Kleist, Maeterlinck and Craig recur to the imagery of death, or of the “lack of life”, to convey the idea of absenting actors from stage and replacing them with inanimate doubles. However, the view of Moholy-Nagy looks to overcome the dualisms of opposing artificial and natural, or of opposing what is living with what is inanimate. In this regard, although anthropomorphic surrogates fulfilled the function of re-enacting human presence without the human affections, they also evidenced a lack of the presence of the actor. Accounting for non-anthropomorphic acting is to acknowledge the materialities of theatrical means as forms of theatrical agency, beyond evidencing that actors are absent.

After showing how a criticism against the displaying of human affections in the context of theatre led to alternative surrogates of human actors, it becomes important to observe how that criticism evolved into a statement about the definition of theatre as an art form. In the following, I show how the refusal of human acting in theatre is entangled with claims about the autonomy of theatre as an artistic discipline, showing that the idea of theatre without actors was directly involved in the attempt to formulate a definition of theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Natures of Theatre: Autonomy and the Actor**

The texts addressed above in this section have shown that the absenting of the actor was not an aim in itself but a consequence of certain criticisms, namely,

against how human actors acted under more influence by their personality and affects than by technique and training. However, I also attempted to make apparent how this criticism was, in fact, also resulting from particular views about the aesthetics of theatre as seen, for example, in the cases of Kleist and Lamb. Kleist aimed to demonstrate how mechanics were more in accordance with natural phenomena than human will, whereas Lamb aimed to demonstrate how dramatic literature could be performed in distinct ways than theatre practices. When Maeterlinck expanded Lamb's view that there were particular aspects to drama that were diverse from theatre, he also sought to define particular aspects that, in his view, were exclusive of theatre. In doing so, Maeterlinck expressed a clear statement opposing the definition of theatre to the presence of human actors.

If his voice [the human], his gestures and his attitude are not veiled by a large number of synthetic conventions, if we realize for a moment the human being he is, there is no poem in the world that does not retreat before it. [...] Every work of art is a symbol and the symbol does not support the active presence of man. (Maeterlinck 1985, 85-86)

This observation about the destructive effects of the "active presence of man" seems to have three implications. Firstly, the work of art is to be understood as autonomous entity defined by its artificiality. Accordingly, an "active presence" of human living beings in an artistic work is a foreign, ex-centric incursion that tends to overrule the autonomy of the artwork: "The stage is a place where works of art are extinguished. [...] Poems die when living beings get into them" (Maeterlinck quoted in Corbin 1903). Secondly, a solution to the problem of "active presence" is to discipline the elements of human affection. The actor's body or persona must be mediated by "synthetic conventions". This is a fundamental step: Maeterlinck suggests that the actor can "veil" his affection by means of conventions that aim at a synthesis with the art work. This means that actors should not act in accordance with their own subjective nature and emotions, but in accordance with the artificial means of the theatre piece, with the "artificial nature" of art. A third implication is the suggestion that the living human can be replaced by an inanimate being, and that this would actually be desirable. Given the artificial nature of the artwork, its most proper performer must itself be artificial. In this way, for Maeterlinck, even if stylized conventions can discipline the living actor, the ideal would be to aim for the absolute withdrawal of the human living actor and its replacement by inanimate beings.

By suggesting that dramatic literature and theatre were distinct practices, authors such as Lamb or Maeterlinck supported a distinction between practices of literature and of theatre. While solitary reading constituted the essential performativity of dramatic literature, the materiality of stage production constituted a specificity of theatre. This implied that each artistic genre could be seen as autonomous. For instance, a defence of the autonomy of theatre can be observed in how Maeterlinck departs from Lamb's distinction between fictional characters and human actors to claim that every work of art is artificial by definition. Accordingly, living beings should not inhabit any artificial creation and, thus, this idea excluded the presence of the human actor doubly: from acting in dramatic literature, and from being present in the theatre.

Similar to Maeterlinck, Craig's claims in "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" also elicit an ambiguity between considering that actors should strive for technique and training, or that actors should be withdrawn from acting. In fact, Craig's seminal essay may be considered as a text built upon two allegories: (1) a dialogue between an actor, a painter and a musician; and (2) the narrative of the fall of the Über-Marionette. The second allegory, which concerns Craig's proposition regarding the removal of the actor, is the most commonly debated. However, the first allegory is of equal significance as it lays out the concerns that urged Craig to formulate the figure of the Über-Marionette as a model for acting.

In the allegory of the dialogue, it is mostly the actor and the painter who speak with each other, whilst the musician remains mute. The dialogue between actor and painter draws comparisons between strategies of representation within theatre and painting. Throughout the dialogue it becomes clear that Craig aims at stressing a lack of technical knowledge and discipline within theatre in comparison to painting or music. In theatre, the emotions of the actor tend to become more important than artistic techniques. However, in painting and music, the focus is on the artwork rather than on the artist. Particularly in music, the technique is so advanced that the musician of Craig's story does not speak at all: his only "means" of expressing himself are the musical scores and sounds. Through this allegory, Craig composes a three-levelled hierarchy of progress, placing the actor at the less advanced level.

They [actors] must create for themselves a new way of interpreting, consisting for the main part in symbolical gesture. To-day, they impersonate and interpret; to-morrow they must represent and interpret, and the third day they must create. By this means style can return. (Craig 1908, 5)

“Embodiment”, “representation” and “creation” are the three constitutive stages of a degree of progress in art: “embodiment” is the degree which is most connected with daily life and dependent upon the artist’s persona; and “creation” is the most artistic, extra-ordinary and autonomous artwork. The middle term of “representation” makes explicit what is to be left behind and what is to be aimed for: the imitation of life should be abandoned and be converted through technique, for the sake of original and autonomous artworks. The development of acting techniques in theatre is a crucial part of Craig’s argument, developed from comparing the artistic processes of the actor, the painter and the musician. By acting “technique”, I am referring to a kind of practice of acting on stage that is based on the accumulation of knowledge and experiences, and that is practiced and trained in a methodological way, rather than varying according to the practitioner’s thoughts and affects. In my view, a certain idea of acting technique has influenced Craig to propose the figure of Über-Marionette as a model for a kind of acting that is based on a methodological practice and training, rather than on an actor’s character or physical characteristics.

Through Maeterlinck’s and Craig’s accounts it becomes apparent how the issue of absenting actors was part of a larger argument about the exclusionary aspects that defined the autonomy of theatre in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the accounts of Prampolini, Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy, the relation between the absenting of the actor and the defence of theatre’s autonomy is less pressing. Instead of a binary enunciation of “death” opposing “life”, their discourse is permeated by an appropriation of scientific and technical lexicon. Rather than referring to “death” as an anti-realist notion, they speak of dynamism and abstraction. These are forms of representation that resist the imitation of life but they are, foremost, forms of presenting, of showing, of making perceivable concrete matter and shapes. Most importantly, the idea of a singular artistic “genre” is dismissed through the affirmation of plural artistic “media”. Instead of anthropomorphic figures, such as mannequins and marionettes and of “individuals” (such as characters), the focus is placed on mechanical movement and matter in itself.

MECHANIZED ECCENTRIC, a concentration of stage action in its purest form. Man, who no longer should be permitted to represent himself as a phenomenon of spirit and mind through his intellectual and spiritual capacities, no longer has any place in this concentration of action. [...] For the purposes of an objective Gestaltung of movement this medium is limited, the more so since it has constant reference to sensible and perceptive (i.e., again literary)

elements. The inadequacy of “human” Exzentrik led to the demand for a precise and fully controlled organization of form and motion, intended to be a synthesis of dynamically contrasting phenomena (space, form, motion, sound, and light). This is the Mechanized Eccentric. (Moholy-Nagy 1971, 52, 54)

In Moholy-Nagy’s essay, the actor is given similar importance as other elements on stage. This levelling allows a comparison between the agency of human actors and non-human matter. In such “horizontal” levelling of theatrical means, the living human acting is considered less precise than “more capable equipment” and, accordingly, as inadequate for a Theatre of Totality. Another important aspect is that Moholy-Nagy’s removal of the living actor does not imply an anthropomorphic replacement. Elements in motion perform by themselves, engaging with the audience in an immersive way that renders the public as active and participatory.

In today’s theater, STAGE AND SPECTATOR are too much separated, too obviously divided into active and passive, to be able to produce creative relationships and reciprocal tensions. It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them take hold and participate—actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy. To see that such a process is not chaotic, but that it develops with control and organization, will be one of the tasks of the thousand-eyed NEW DIRECTOR, equipped with all the modern means of understanding and communication. (Moholy-Nagy 1971: 67-68)

By removing the actor without any life-like replacement, Moholy-Nagy seems to aim at also removing its role as mediator. Like Prampolini, his need to remove actors is not motivated by the limitations of their physical presence but, mostly, by the urge to remove the capacity of the actor to act as mediator between audience and stage. The removal of the actor’s mediating role is meant to allow other medial strategies to become more significant, and to immerse the audience in a more direct and — supposedly — more immediate way. By distributing this mediating agency through other material aspects of theatre — such as light, space, motion, sound, form — the presence of human actors becomes dispensable. For Moholy-Nagy, the emerging figure that articulates this distribution of means and matter onstage becomes the

theatre director, whose “thousand-eyed” control appears to grant autonomy to the medium, instead of the actor.

### **Conclusion: Relating Motives**

In this section, I have discussed a number of essays written in the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that offered explicit views about absenting the actor from theatre. I have shown why absenting the actor was seen as a possibility and how its surrogating was envisioned in practical terms. I have also shown that the absenting of the actor was in part a result of a rethinking of the medium of theatre, rather than an aim in itself.

In these essays, the opposition to staging of actors ranged from criticizing ways of acting — unlikely, exaggerated, too emotive or self-centred — to manifesting discomfort with the sheer physical presence of actors, who would not “fit” an imagined fictional character<sup>123</sup>. Protesting against actors with too much of their personal presence on stage, theatre makers sought for stage presence without actors. The feeling of inadequacy about actors’ presence and their ways of acting led to the consideration of the possibility of dissociating actors from theatrical acting. Accordingly, strategies of staging were proposed, and other entities, whether in anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic forms, would act in place of actors. Through these strategies, the absence of actors was seen to assure the autonomy of theatre by facilitating an apparent self-sufficiency of its own methodical and artificial practice. This also made apparent that the absenting of the actor was not merely seen to be instrumental in improving theatrical performance but that it implied also a view about the specificity of theatre as a medium. This argumentation became particularly synthesized in the words of Maeterlinck and Craig who based their appeal to absenting the actor by inanimate surrogates on their views of theatre as an artistic practice defined by artificiality and technique.

Artificiality was seen as an essential property of theatre and, accordingly, theatre should privilege the presentation of artificial things over organic beings — such as human actors. Further on this note, I think it is interesting to consider that this interest in staging artificiality implied an implicit fascination with showing things in their concreteness and materiality. This appears to be a relevant way of reading

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<sup>123</sup> In Kantor’s reference to this period in “The Theatre of Death”, he indicates that the actor was seen “subject to the laws of NATURE, as a foreign intrusion into Artistic Fiction” (Kantor 1993, 107).

how these authors often describe the strategies of surrogating actors with regards to their objectual properties, to the materials they are made of, to their mechanical motion or their immobility, to their potential to develop visual effects. This step may become more apparent if we think of the authors mentioned in this section as, mainly, set designers and playwrights, to whom the practice of staging is determined by the practice of making something objectual.

In this regard, the importance of staging artificiality shows the objecthood of artifices in theatre, that is, of thing staged, but also of the means to stage them. I find this aspect relevant because this can be seen as an aspect in common with contemporary theatre without actors. As seen in the first chapter, in contemporary examples where actors are absent, there is also a concern with making perceivable the concrete objecthood of things and mechanisms, as well as the materiality of the means of perceiving them.

### **Conclusion: A “Low Profile” Tradition**

In the programme of the exhibition *Invisible — Art About the Unseen* (2012)<sup>124</sup>, Ralph Rugoff refers to an exhibition by Yves Klein in 1957 that, in Rugoff’s opinion, marked the beginning of the history of invisible art. Rugoff writes: “Klein’s presentation of blank walls as an artwork arguably kicked off a low profile tradition that has gone on to span seven decades”. (Rugoff 2012, 5) I would like to appropriate Rugoff’s expression of a “low profile tradition” and apply it to describe the history of theatre without actors. I have shown how examples of performances without human actors can be traced back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I have also shown that the possibility of theatre without actors was seriously considered and debated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the possibility of conceiving of theatre without actors was not limited to the authors and makers discussed on the previous pages but were, often in a more implicit way, present in the work and ideas of many more theatre makers. In “The Actor and the Über-Marionette”, Craig indicates a community of artists which he identifies as affiliated with the idea that the actor is not fit to the theatre, mentioning Ben Jonhson, Lessing, Edmund Scherer, Hans Christian Andersen, Lamb, Goethe, George Sand, Coleridge, Anatole France, Ruskin, and Pater (Craig 1908, 10-11). One

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<sup>124</sup> *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*, curated by Ralph Rugoff, Hayward Gallery, London, June 12 – August 5, 2012.

other example is that of Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who developed a stylized mode of acting inspired by the idea of having inanimate bodies as models for acting: for example, in the static acting style of his staging of Maeterlinck's *Sister Béatrice* (1906)<sup>125</sup>, or in the impressive final scene of *The Government Inspector* (1926)<sup>126</sup>, when wax mannequins replaced the full cast of actors, resembling each one of the performers. Among other Bauhaus artists besides Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy, Kurt Schwertfeger's *Reflecting Light Games*<sup>127</sup>, a performance of coloured lights and patterns presented at the Bauhaus in 1922/23, could be considered as an early example of a performance of "matter", without actors. A significant author whose works challenge the acting and presence of performers is Samuel Beckett, credited to have claimed that "The best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text! I'm trying to find a way to write one."<sup>128</sup>. Quite a few of Beckett's plays entail issues of presence and absence of actors, where a privileging of text is followed by a reduction of the actor's bodily presence, tending towards its disappearance, as for example in *Not I* (1972)<sup>129</sup>, and, notably, in *Breath* (1969)<sup>130</sup>. Furthermore, it is relevant to note how the work of Beckett has been appropriated by contemporary theatre makers into pieces without actors — as in Marleau's staging of *Comédie* or Verdonck's staging of "Lessness" in *Huminid*.

This "low profile tradition" of theatre without actors is not homogeneous and is developed discontinuously<sup>131</sup>. This discontinuity may be due to the fact that the absencing of the actor has rarely been an aim in itself but mostly as a result of broader artistic claims or shadowing aesthetic developments — as demonstrated in the se-

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125 *Sister Beatrice*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Komissarzewskaja Theatre, Saint Petersburg, 1906

126 *The Government Inspector*, by Nikolai Gogol, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Meyerhold Theatre, Moscow, 1926

127 *Reflecting Light Games*, by Kurt Schwertfeger, with Joseg Hartwig and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, Lantern Festival Bauhaus, Weimar, 1922

128 This remark by Samuel Beckett was made to Deirdre Bair in an interview. Deirdre Bair in *Samuel Beckett: a Biography* (London: Picador, 1980) p. 433.

129 *Not I*, by Samuel Beckett, directed by Alan Schneider, with the Repertory Theater, Lincoln Center, New York, November 22, 1972

130 *Breath*, by Samuel Beckett, Close Theatre Club, Glasgow, October, 1969

131 It is interesting to note how the idea of absencing the actor seems to have disappeared after the first quarter of the 20th century and only resurfaced in the 1990s. A possible explanation is that a progressive reforming of the profession of the actor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — concerning training and professionalization — contributed to an establishment of actors as constitutive part in defining theatre.

cond section of this chapter. In the following, I show how this is also the case as this tradition resurfaces around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the next chapter, I show how reconsiderations of the nature of the medium of the theatre set the stage for a re-emergence of theatre without actors.

# Chapter 3

## — Framing the Emergence of Theatre Without Actors within Theatre and Performance Studies

### Introduction: Expanding Theatre in Discourses of Theatre and Performance Studies of the 1990's

This chapter aims to show how certain discourses about theatre and performance in the 1990's set the stage for an expansion of how theatre is comprehended and how this expansion made space for the possibility of theatre without actors. In the following, I introduce and discuss texts offering arguments about the effects of technology on physical presence and co-presence, about the possibility of thinking of theatricality beyond a theatrical context and in a real-life setting, and about practices of staging the real that rethink theatre as an environmental practice. I focus on the decade of the 1990's, because this was the period immediately preceding the emergence of theatre without actors as described in the first chapter, from the year 2000 onwards. Unlike the historical references discussed in the previous chapter, the texts discussed in this chapter do not explicitly discuss the possibility of theatre without actors. Rather, as I show, they can be seen to mark transformations in thinking about theatre in the 1990's that opened the possibility of conceiving of theatre without actors. I argue that these texts invite thinking on the physical presence of performers, technological surrogacies and forms of mediating the perception of reality, as well as expansions of the notion of theatre, and of the notion of co-presence beyond a dualist view.

In order to address how changes in thinking about theatre and performance in the 1990's opened the possibility to conceive of theatre as something that can take place without actors in the 2000's, this chapter brings together discourses of theatre and performance studies. Some references engage with fields of scholarship associated with theatre studies and others with performance art, and I assemble both views because it is their intersection that makes clear how changes in the 1990's allowed for the absenting of the actor in the following decade. Furthermore, the object of

my research, contemporary pieces without actors, can also be located in both traditions, of theatre and of performance art. I reflect on these discourses within two main sections: while the first introduces a view positing the physical co-presence of actors and audiences as a fundamental aspect to define theatre, the second section introduces views that challenge that view, namely, discourses addressing the effects of staging technology, of thinking about theatricality in an expanded way, and of thinking about theatre in relation to nature.

In the first main section, “Challenging Notions of Unmediated Presence,” I start by introducing concepts and arguments developed by scholars Peggy Phelan and Erika Fischer-Lichte, whom, in the 1990’s, argued that the ephemerality of the performative act was fundamental to define theatre and performance. I show how, in their views, an understanding of performance as being essentially ephemeral and unmediated is closely connected to an understanding of the relation of co-presence as a fundamental aspect to define the theatrical event. I elaborate on such understanding to show how this approach to the co-presence of actors and spectators as a fundament of theatre implies three assumptions: that the performing of a piece is seen to precede acts of mediations such as its contextualisation or the act of documenting it; that the physical presence of the actor is seen as a privileged means of guaranteeing the ephemerality of acting; and that a relation of co-presence between actors and spectators is seen as a direct and unmediated relation and a pre-condition for theatre and performance to occur.

In the second section titled “Discourses Advancing Notions of Mediated Presence”, I develop my arguments in three parts. In the first part, “Challenging Assumptions on Unmediated Co-Presence Through Discourses Surrounding Performance and Technology,” I introduce a set of discourses that challenge views on unmediated co-presence as characteristic of theatre and performance and offer perspectives about the influence of technology on performance as well as on the understanding of presence in performance. Specifically, I look at the work of scholars Philip Auslander, Amelia Jones, Elinor Fuchs and Beatrice Picon-Vallin, to show how discourses surrounding the appropriation of technological developments in theatre and performance in the 1990’s challenged the understanding of liveness, presence and co-presence, and thus challenged Phelan’s and Fischer-Lichte’s essential definitions of theatre and performance.

In the second part, entitled “Expanding Disciplinary Limits Through Views About Theatricality”, I engage with texts by Josette Féral, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Eli Rozik, whom, during the 1990’s, explored the notion of theatricality. In their ac-

counts, to think about theatricality involved thinking about what kind of aspects could be referred to as being theatre-based or theatre-related and how this reference might occur. In this way of looking at theatricality, specific questions are addressed, such as: what leads one to say that one theatre piece is more theatrical than another? Or more theatrical than another artwork such as a literary text, a painting, a film or a musical composition? If the audience is a common element in acknowledging theatricality in theatre and beyond it, how is theatre constituted by the spectatorial gaze? These questions matter to this study, in how their attempts at defining theatricality draw attention to a shift in ways of staging actors towards ways of staging the spectatorial gaze, particularly when devising theatre in non-theatrical situations and environments.

Finally, in the third part, entitled “Ecological Theatre and the Staging of the Real” I address discursive approaches to post-modern performances of the 1990’s that engaged with notions of “landscape”, “nature” or “environment”, either metaphorically or literally. These were referred to as forms of “ecological theatre”, as seen in texts by Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs<sup>132</sup> or as forms of “staging the real”, as addressed by Hans-Thies Lehmann. My interest in introducing these discourses is in showing how the artistic possibilities and theoretical questions of staging of the real were envisioned and developed in the 1990’s and contributed to the new conceptions around theatre without actors. Considering this perspective, I move from introducing discourses about “ecological theatre” towards the post-dramatic view of Lehmann, according to which forms of staging the real involve a staging of perceptibility and imply a degree of undecidability about what is theatrical and nontheatrical. It is following these perspectives that I conclude by proposing to look at theatre without actors as a practice of rehearsing perception and co-presence, not only as a way of looking at “what is there” or visualising “what can be there” but, inherently, as a practice of experimenting with a sense of the environments we inhabit and as a practice of speculating new modes for humans and non-humans to be co-present.

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<sup>132</sup> Besides Chaudhuri and Fuchs, other authors have also put forth relevant contributions about an ecological view of theatre such as Bonnie Marranca in *Ecologies of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), or Baz Kershaw in *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and, Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart in *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (Bern: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2006). The term ecology continued to gain popularity after the 1990s. I elaborate on this notion further in the end of the second section of this chapter.

### Discourses Establishing Notions of Unmediated Presence

I start by introducing discourses by Peggy Phelan and Erika Fischer-Lichte who propose that the ephemerality of the performing act is an essential aspect of a definition of theatre and performance. In defining theatre and performance in this way, they have also highlighted the importance of a physical co-presence gathering performers and spectators. They see this co-extensive, simultaneous and ephemeral gathering as an opportunity for being in the presence of actors in a way that is liberated from technological mediations. For Phelan and Fischer-Lichte, the possibility of such immediacy between humans is a fundamental aspect to define theatre and performance as aesthetic forms and as politically engaged art practices associated with ephemerality and presence. Moreover, as I will show, this is an understanding in line with earlier discourses, such as those by theatre makers Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski during the 1960's.

My aim in introducing these views is in making clear three aspects: how a dualist account of co-presence was introduced and put forward as fundament for theatre and performance, how this understanding of co-presence relates with notions such as physical presence or technological mediation, and how such view of co-presence can be positioned in a historical moment. In doing so, I aim at establishing that although practices of theatre without actors challenge a dualist account of co-presence, they do not exclude an expanded view about relations of co-presence — a line of argumentation that I develop in the second section of the chapter.

#### Peggy Phelan

In the opening lines of the essay “The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction”, Peggy Phelan describes an essentialist account of performance, by establishing a correlation between “being present” and “being in time” as the base for an ontology<sup>133</sup> of performance:

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<sup>133</sup> This correspondence between “being present” and “being in time” as ontological account will be approached again in the conclusion of this dissertation, concerning how German philosopher Martin Heidegger questioned the defining of being as that which is in the present, which he termed as the “metaphysics of presence”, indicating that there should be an undoing of such assumption. For further reading see Carol White, in “The Time of Being and the Metaphysics of Presence”, *Man and World*, Vol. 29, (1996) pp. 146-166

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. [...] Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies. (Phelan 2005, 146, 148)

Phelan established that a discourse about the “being of” a performance — an ontology — should depart from its constitutive time-based dimension. Moreover, Phelan understands this time-baseness as performed by “the presence of living bodies”. In this way, Phelan indicates that, for her, the time-basedness of performance cannot be performed by inanimate agency, such as mechanical bodies, technological means or documentation. With this definition, Phelan intended to resist precisely the ways in which technologies affect the perception of temporality and, in this way, disturb a sense of physical presence. For Phelan, only living bodies can be perceived to be in the present time and it is because of their ability of “being present” that human agency is privileged as fundamental to an ontology — a discourse about the being — of performance.

However, given that a performance only exists in the present, the necessary transience of the present instant implies a dissipation of the instance of presence. In this sense, “to be” present is not only a manner of continuous being, but also a continuum of disappearance. As Phelan writes,

To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. (Phelan 2005, 146)

Given that the condition of what is ephemeral is ontologically fulfilled in its own dissipation, the closure of its appearance asserts its unrepeatability. In this way, Phelan states that it would become impossible to record and reproduce and thus commodify the experience of acting or spectating a performative act. Because it is not possible to capture the fleeting presence of the performer's living body, mediation becomes also impossible. In this way, the commodification of a performance could be resisted, as well as its objectification into reproducible and mass-produced traces. As if formulating a paradox, Phelan views the transience of a physical co-presence as a defining constant of the performing arts.

Erika Fischer-Lichte

Prior to the publication of Phelan's essay, Erika Fischer-Lichte observes theatre from a semiotic perspective in *The Semiotics of Theatre* (Fischer-Lichte 1992), first published in German in 1983, with an English translation released in 1992. In her book, Fischer-Lichte reflects on how signs and meanings are produced on stage and are received by an audience. In particular, Fischer-Lichte observes what occurs when actors perform, by attending to the gestures they produce, as well as their elocution.

Significantly, in the context of a book that aims at describing how meaning is produced in performance, the practice of theatre is in fact sharply defined by falling back to a schematic definition: "the minimum pre-conditions for theatre to be theatre are that person A represents X while S looks on" (Fischer-Lichte 1992, 7). This formula can be translated as: the minimum pre-conditions to define theatre are that "actor" (person A) represents "undefined" (X) while "spectator" (S) looks on. This definition highlights how for Fischer-Lichte the co-presence between actor and spectator is an essential relation in theatre, which she establishes as a "minimum" and a "pre-condition" for its existence.

Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte's schematic definition presupposes that the relation between actor and spectator is established between two humans and that actor and spectator are distinguished as opposites, thus as the being seen and the seer. Moreover, this suggests that it is possible to reduce the definition of theatre to one fundamental relation, the relation between actor and spectator, and that such relation is unmediated.

The notion of co-presence is again subject of discussion in Fischer-Lichte's book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Here she discusses co-presence as a core concept to define not theatre but performance. In this book, Fischer-Lichte indicates that the on-going feedback loop happening between performers and audience is a pre-condition of artistic performative practices<sup>134</sup>. In this way, co-presence is placed and protected as a corner stone for an "aesthetics of performativity" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 99), as indicated in this fragment:

The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must assemble

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<sup>134</sup> Fischer-Lichte describes "feedback loop" as the constant flow of communication, "a self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process emerged as the defying principle of the theatrical work" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 39)

to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time [...] [these are) underlying factors which in my view must be given when applied the term performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 32)

Significantly, here Fischer-Lichte is posing co-presence as an “underlying factor” of performance, while as discussed above, the same argument has in fact been applied by Fischer-Lichte to define theatre in 1992 (1983 in the German original publication). However, in 2008, the positing of co-presence as an enabler and a constitutive aspect of a performance assumes not only a defining role but also an exclusionary function, namely, by refusing technological mediation:

While they [products of technical and electronic media] might stimulate effects of presence, they are unable to generate presence itself. For presence erases the dichotomy of being and appearing so fundamental to the aesthetic discourse of the last centuries, but the presence effects created by technical and electronic media actually depended on this very dichotomy. They create the *impression* of presentness [...] With the help of technology they are able to make the promise of presence. [...] While presence brings forth the human body in its materiality, as energetic body and living organism, technical and electronic media create the impression by dematerializing and disembodying it [...] In this sense, an aesthetics of the performative is to be regarded as an aesthetics of presence (Lehmann 1999, 22) rather than of presence effects, and as the aesthetics of “appearing” (Seel 2004) rather than of appearance. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 98, 99)

In her dismissal of the mediated, Fischer-Lichte considers the apparition of bodies, but overlooks their “means” of appearing. The statement is grounded in dichotomies: between presence and effects of presence, between immediate and mediated relations, between appearing and appearance. This distinction between beings that appear and impressions of appearances conjures Phelan’s account of performance as an ontology of disappearance, that is, as a form of being present which avoids becoming an appearance by permanently fading into disappearance. However, Fischer-Lichte’s reiteration of co-presence as a fundament to define performance underlines one aspect of Phelan’s account, namely, the reiteration of a dichotomy between humans and technologically produced beings — such as digital doubles of actors or documentation. Fischer-Lichte identifies that the distinction between mediated

and immediate performance engages with “the dichotomy of being and appearing so fundamental to the aesthetic discourse of the last centuries.” For Fischer-Lichte, a mediated performance depends on this dichotomy; she considers that physical human presence erases the dualism between being and appearing. Therefore, technological renderings of humans are not beings in themselves and should not be acknowledged as being present. Furthermore, physical presence in performance may simply “appear” and not be coded or layered by any form of mediation.

Through their minimal definitions of theatre and performance, Phelan and Fichte-Lichte exemplify a kind of discursive approach of the 1990’s that defined theatre and performance through the ephemerality of human acting and the co-presence of human actors and audiences. These aspects were seen to be able to describe essential aspects of theatre and performance in an exclusive way, that is, distinctively from other artistic disciplines. Their definitions were not trying to describe an evident matter of fact of theatre and performance — as it may appear from the condensed definition of Fischer-Lichte in 1992 — but they were also advancing a humanist claim at the heart of theatrical and performative practices. Their view is not only concerned with the aesthetics of performance but also with the gathering of human performers and spectators as an ethical stance and a political act. In this regard, it is interesting to note how such an essentialist view is not initiated by Phelan and Fischer-Lichte nor is it an exclusive development of Theatre and Performance Studies of the 1990’s. In fact, their accounts echo views expressed in the 1960’s about performance art and theatre, as seen in statements by theatre directors Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.

Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski

An understanding of theatre as defined by co-presence of actors and spectators in the 1960’s can be found in statements of, among others, theatre directors Brook and Grotowski. As I refer to in the main introduction of this dissertation, British theatre director Brook stated: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 1996, 7). This sentence is the opening line of the book *The Empty Space* (originally published in 1968) where Brook analyses a panorama of groups and strategies of staging in the 1960’s: from commercial forms of theatre to experimental approaches, from pieces that prompt the participation of the audience to pieces that focus on researching the

actor's expressivity. In this way, Brook's initial statement is not a principle to be further consolidated throughout his book, but rather, appears to be an assertion to take into account while reading.

Within the logic of *The Empty Space*, when defining theatre in such minimal terms, the intention was not to constrain artistic forms to a given formula, but rather to draw a commonality between the diversity of examples presented in the book. In this sense, I understand Brook's minimal definition to have been intended to allow space for experimentation and associations: if theatre is defined as a relation between actor and spectator, then, everything else is allowed; every formal and intermedial experiment can be seen as theatre so long as it maintains that relation. Brook's depurated account of co-presence appears to have been suggested, at the time, as an instrumental simplification, rather than as an essential definition: defining theatre as a relation between actors and spectators allowed for an expanded understanding of theatre that could also include, for example, participatory theatre, site-specific performance, or the rewriting of classical texts.

In the same year *The Empty Space* was published, Brook prefaced the English language edition of Polish theatre director Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Grotowski 2002), originally published in 1968. Grotowski's book contains texts, interviews and material on actor training methods. Significantly, in his book, Grotowski too articulates the idea of theatre as defined by the co-presence of actors and spectators, albeit in a different way:

theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion. (Grotowski 2002, 19)

In following Grotowski's arguments, the relation between actor and spectator appears to become simpler because material aspects are excluded or obfuscated. He suggests that, in subtracting elements such as costumes, stages settings and lights, the co-presence of actors and spectators becomes increasingly more essential. This is the reason why, in his view, theatre should move towards a "poor" state, that is, a state dispossessed of things but enriched by a community of the "living", sharing a "perceptual, direct" relationship. In a similar way to Phelan's definition of the ontology of performance, one may understand Grotowski's essentialist view as a political project that privileges human agency as central to theatre and devalues

material aspects of theatre as commodities. Grotowski's account denotes that such fundamental "poor state" is attained through a process of reduction<sup>135</sup>: by progressively eliminating make-up and costumes, stage settings, of light and sound effects. Grotowski enumerates all that theatre may exist "without" in order to affirm the only thing it exists with: the communion of actors and spectator and aims for a definition of theatre which is exclusive, essentialist and autonomous. Copeland observes how in the mid-60s, Grotowski took a comparably hard line against technological mediation.

"What is the theatre? What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot?" he [Grotowski] asked in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968, 19) [...] Theatre groups who made use of microphones, film, and video were accused by Grotowski of "artistic kleptomania," of stealing from other media (which had the effect of obscuring — and also mediating — the theatre's "true" source of power). (Copeland 1990, 32)

Copeland points out how Grotowski's "poor theatre" challenges the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines (literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, and acting). The dismissal of those disciplines, Copeland observes, "refuses — unwisely in my opinion — to differentiate between brassy, overproduced Broadway musicals and more ambitious exercises in what used to be called 'total theatre'" (Copeland 1990, 32) In this regard, Grotowski affirms something different from Brook, given that, while Brook proposes a minimal account of co-presence so that a multiplicity of forms could be accounted as theatre, for

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<sup>135</sup> It would be interesting to expand Grotowski's statement in alignment with Craig's steps of reduction towards the absenting of the human, indicated in Chapter 2, but also with Georg Fuchs' formulation of retheatricalisation as a process of reduction. These authors suggest that there is a relation between a process of material reduction and an enhancement of perceiving theatricality, given that the reduction moves towards simpler and essential aspects. It would be also interesting to see how this view could have resonated with or be reinforced by what Lucy Lippard described in the 1960's as dematerialisation of the work of art. It appears that, as visual artists sought to dematerialise beyond the presence of the art object and towards the acting of materials and human bodies, they were also developing a way of viewing performance art as based on human presence. In this way, it appears that discourses suggesting that processes of reduction empowered retheatricalisation in theatre may have contributed to a binary view of co-presence in performance art.

Grotowski, the exclusion of multiple forms of performing serves the purpose of not allowing anything else than the relation of co-presence to be seen as theatre.

### Expanding Co-Presence

The contributions of Phelan and Fischer-Lichte in the 1990's, as well as the claims by Brook and Grotowski in the end of the 1960's show how the relation of co-presence has been, in these cases, articulated as a relation established between human actors and spectators. Furthermore, this relation has also been put forward as a fundamental aspect to define theatre and performance, namely, in two distinct ways: on the one hand, considering co-presence as an essential aspect to define theatre and performance serves to establish a common point across different forms of making theatre; on the other hand, the view of co-presence as an aspect that occurs exclusively in theatre and performance art is instrumental in claiming an aesthetic stance that distinguished these fields from other artistic practices. Therefore, in this framework, practices of theatre where there are no human actors — such as those with machines, with the autonomous participation of audiences, with animals, or the spectatorial gaze over landscapes — interrupt such a definition of co-presence, that is, as a relation between two kinds of humans: actors and spectators. Following such a fundamental change in the relation between acting subjects and theatre audiences, it also follows that theatre without actors invites for a rethinking of co-presence beyond a dualist account and in an expanded way. Considering this, in the following sections, I introduce three kinds of discourses from the 1990's, contemporaries of Phelan and Fischer-Lichte's claims, where such rethinking of co-presence is initiated.

### **Discourses Advancing Notions of Mediated Presence and Non-Human Acting**

In this section, I introduce a selection of discourses from the field of Theatre and Performance Studies since the 1990's that challenge essentialist views about co-presence in theatre and performance. The section is composed of three parts. In the first part, I discuss texts by Béatrice Picon-Vallin, Amelia Jones and Philip Auslander, who pose questions such as: how does mediation affects how actors act? How does it affect the way we perceive them as being present or acting live? How are forms of mediation, such as documentation for example, thought of as performative? In

addressing such questions, these authors challenge views about ephemerality, dualist accounts of co-presence and the primacy of human presence.

In the second part, I look at texts by Josette Féral, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Eli Rozik who reflect on changes in the conception of theatricality. Rather than seeing theatricality as something that pertains to theatre exclusively, they look at theatricality as referring to aspects that address theatre extensively, that is, in non-theatrical contexts, such as in other art fields, but also in real-life environments. By rethinking the conditions of producing and of acknowledging theatrical situations, these authors have contributed to dislocate the locus of theatrical agency from actors and into the spectatorial gaze.

Finally, in the third part, I introduce a third kind of discourse emerging in the 1990's within theatre and performance studies that challenged human-centred views about co-presence, namely, discourses engaged with forms of ecological theatre of staging the real. Reflecting on the relation and exchanges between theatre and nature, Una Chaudhuri, Elinor Fuchs and Hans-Thies Lehmann address forms of performing that are seen as part of environments bringing together humans and non-humans, and that involve strategies of staging the real. By reflecting on the relation of theatre and nature in an expanded way, these authors contribute to thinking about theatre as a complex material environment, rather than as an event separated from the world, and allow for an expansion of the understanding of exchange between humans and non-humans in performance.

Even though the ideas presented by these authors during the 1990's do not directly engage in discussions around theatre without actors, my aim is to show how their ideas can be understood as reflections about expanded ways of thinking about theatre and performance, which paves the way for the possibility of thinking about theatre without actors: in the demise of a kind of theatre centred around human presence and in their reflection on strategies of staging and of spectating reality within the context of theatre.

### **Challenging Assumptions About Unmediated Co-Presence Through Discourses About Performance and Technology**

The increasing appropriation of technology in theatrical performances in the decades of the 1980's and 1990's brought about an expansion of possibilities, which not only markedly impacted scenography, storytelling and spectatorship, but also pointed to new possibilities in the staging and perceiving of theatrical presence,

liveness and agency. By reflecting on the consequences of staging technology, a number of discourses in the fields of theatre and performance studies also contest that the relation of co-presence is an unmediated relation, or fundamental to the definition of theatre. In the following, I show how discursive approaches such as those by Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander have contributed to the questioning of those two aspects, and to the expansion of views about theatre, including the possibility of theatre without actors.

Since the 1980's the use of technology in the fields of theatre and performance grew substantially and came to challenge specific aspects of the definition of theatre as essentially being about the co-presence of actors and performers, for example, in cases of pieces that explore video projections, radio broadcasting, aural immersion, internet connection, as well as machines, chatbots, robots and actroids. Particularly, I underline how new and prolific ways of embedding technology into the fields of theatre and performance brought about questions on several aspects of the definition of co-presence. If co-presence can be defined as a relation based in the simultaneous and co-extensive physical presence of actors and spectators, then this definition becomes challenged by technological mediations in (among others) the following two regards: the perception of time and space (for instance, through video feeds or internet connections); and the technologic surrogates of actors or spectators (such as video images, automata or chatbots).

An example of how the staging of technology challenges the definition of co-presence can be found in Roger Copeland's article "The Presence of Mediation". (Copeland 1990) In this article, Copeland noted how views about liveness and presence as unmediated relations were often put forward as definitions of theatre.

What is unique about the theatre? What can happen there that can't happen at the movies, or in literature, or while standing before a painting or a work of sculpture? Until recently, the answer—no matter who provided it—almost always had something to do with the fact that it's live and unmediated, that it can put us in the presence of other living, breathing human being. (Copeland 1990, 31)

As Copeland indicates, the possibility of unmediated presence was seen as an "unique" aspect of theatre and, in that regard, it aimed not only at defining theatre but also at distinguishing it from other art practices. However, according to him, this view was not consensual in the theatre field but was part of a polarised debate. The

polarisation happened between authors defining theatre through the possibility of “pure, unmediated presence vs those ‘poststructuralist’ thinkers who complicate the distinction between presence and absence” (Copeland 1990, 29). In the following, I look into examples of discourses that complicate an account of co-presence as an unmediated relation, particularly, by looking into texts by Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander. My aim is to show how their views have contributed to overcome the assumption that the presence of actors is fundamental in defining theatre, and how, ultimately, these views contribute to generate theoretical grounds preceding an emergence of pieces without actors from the year 2000.

### Béatrice Picon-Vallin

The layering between forms of mediated and unmediated presence on stage and its impact in rethinking human presence in the field of theatre is approached by Picon-Vallin, in “Hybridations Spatiales, Registres de Presence”, (Picon-Vallin 1998) with her notion of “registres de presence” (registers of presence). This notion accounted for the variations in perceiving the presence of actors on intermedial performances as being mediated or unmediated. As Picon-Vallin writes:

Registers of presence are variations of the being-there (*être-là*) of the actor, of the objects, of the action/ play — [...] double of the actor on stage, double inscribed of the actor, absent from representation. [...] The shimmering image of the video does not completely compromises the overall presence of the actor on stage, but it *destabilizes* it. [...] The coexistence of different inscriptions (*registres*) of presence implies tension between living bodies and dematerialized bodies. (Picon-Vallin 1998, 29)<sup>136</sup>

Picon-Vallin discusses two aspects that challenge an account of co-presence where the presence of the actor and audience are considered a fundamental characteristic of theatre: the first aspect is that the video double of the actor produces a material

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<sup>136</sup> Translated from original by author: “On a eu recours à la notion de *niveau* ou de *registre de presence* pour rendre compte des variations de l’ “être-là” hybride de l’acteur, des objects, du jeu —[...] double enregistré de l’acteur absent de la representation [...] L’image miroitante de la video ne compromet pas totalement la toute-présence du comédien en scène, mais elle la *destabilise*. [...] La coexistence des différents registres de presence implique une tension entre corps vivant et corps dématérialisé”

presence which relates to the presence of the living actor; and the second aspect is that the sense of present time may be manipulated by the video's ability to generate images through pre-recorded, delayed and live transmission. Thus, the main difference regarding the use of video is not only the disturbance of the status between the live and the inanimate, but the possibility of *live* streaming on stage destabilising a perception of the actor's presence as being unmediated. Considering the effects of such appropriations of video technologies, Picon-Vallin questions radically whether the perception of liveness in performance is dependent on the presence of living actors.

What do we (misleadingly) designate as *live performance* [*spectacle vivant*] is a performance with living actors, in flesh and bone? [...] Isn't the live performance possible today without actors on stage, really present? [...] The actant [*l'actant*<sup>137</sup>] dancer, actor – must be on stage to be present? (Picon-Vallin 1998, 9-10)<sup>138</sup>

Picon-Vallin indicates that given a modification in the ways of perceiving a live presentation or live presence, this modification implies a change in perceiving the physical presence of actors<sup>139</sup>. In her view, the possibility of absencing the actor could be foreseen as the ultimate consequence of the challenges brought by technology to perceiving human presence and agency on stage. She reflects on the effects of these modifications through two questions: on the one hand, can we conceive liveness without the presence of the actor? And, on the other hand, must the actor be on stage to be perceived as present? These questions are similar and related, but they also engage with two kinds of discourses. The first question deals with views about the perception of liveness, while the second question is focused on views proposing alternative ways of staging human presence. Considering these two issues, in the

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<sup>137</sup> Picon-Vallin also proposes the notion of “interacteur” instead of “acteur”, underlining interaction as feature of the actor in the theatrical video setting.

<sup>138</sup> Translated from original by author: “Ce qu'on désigne par l'appellation mal contrôlée de “spectacle vivant” est-il bien toujours un spectacle avec des acteurs vivants, en chair et en os? [...] Et n'y aurait-il pas de “spectacle vivant” possible aujourd'hui sans acteurs présents sur le plateau, réellement présents [...] L'actant— danseur, comédien — doit'il être en scène pour être présent?”

<sup>139</sup> Picon-Vallin's reflection on the hybridity of the presence of actors, when interacting with their digital presence, invokes Verdonck's piece, *M, a Reflection*, where an actor and its digital double interact together live on stage.

following I engage, with texts by scholar Amelia Jones, who has developed a relevant approach to the relation between performance and documentation, that invites a rethinking of how the liveness and the presence of actors could be perceived.

Amelia Jones

In the article “‘Presence’ as Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, Jones begins by observing the problem of approaching “body artworks through their photographic, textual, oral, video, and/or film traces.” (Jones 1997, 11) Rather than seeing a methodological problem in accessing a performance through its documentation, Jones articulates a distinction between being physically co-present with a performance and having intersubjective access to a performance through its documentation. For Jones, these are two distinct spectatorial experiences:

the problems raised by my absence (my not having been there) are largely logistical rather than ethical or hermeneutic. That is, while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical “truth” of the performance [...] While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange (viewer / reader <-> document) is equally intersubjective. (Jones 1997, 11, 12)

According to Jones, neither the “flesh-to-flesh engagement” of a performance, nor “the documentary exchange” posterior to a performance have precedence over each other, because they equally allow for “intersubjective experiences”. Accordingly, she expresses interest in works that “remain ambiguous in terms of its relation to an audience”. Such works can be seen to inhabit both a context of live performance but also of documented performance: “[work] that took place through an enactment of the artist’s body, whether it be in a “performance” setting or [...] documented such that it could subsequently be experienced through photography, film, video, and/or text” (Jones 1997, 18). Jones’ approach is relevant to thinking about theatre without actors because, on the one hand, it questions how the value of physical co-presence of actors and spectators may be argued by opposition to documentation while, on the other hand, it allows the possibility to “spectate” performance documentation — which happens, in a certain way, in strategies described in “Chapter 1” such as

those of “Doubles” or “Aural Scores”, where performances stage the reproduction of a previous performance by actors.

Jones explicitly contextualises her critique in opposition to understandings of performance art that privilege the centrality of the presence of the performer. She writes:

One of the major conceptual and theoretical issues highlighted by body art as performance [...], is that of the ontology of the art “object.” Most early accounts of these practices made heroic claims for the status of performance as the only art form to guarantee the presence of the artist.

Thus, in 1975 Ira Licht triumphantly proclaimed that bodyworks do away with the “intermediary” mediums of painting and sculpture to “deliver ... information directly through transformation.” [...] More recently, Catherine Elwes argued that performance art [...] “is about the ‘real-life’ presence of the artist... She is both signifier and that which is signified. Nothing stands between spectator and performer.” I have already made clear that I specifically reject such conceptions of body art or performance as delivering in an unmediated fashion the body (and implicitly the self). (Jones 1997, 13)

Jones clearly wishes to distinguish her approach from views on performance that are based on the idea that the ephemerality of performance has ontological precedence over documentation, arguing 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”. (*ibid.*) Thus, Jones considers that performing bodies are still art “objects” and, rather than allowing unmediated access, body art work “expose[s] the impossibility of attaining full knowledge of the self through bodily proximity”. (*ibid.*) Jones proposes that it is the live event — and not documentation — that compromises the perception of presence because, on the one hand, the event is considered as representational; on the other hand, its eventfulness is already coded by history, advertisement, expectation, and remembrance. In this sense, “there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art” (*ibid.*, 12) because the real event is absorbed, reified and documentary of itself in an (ephemeral) real time.

In “The Artist is Present”, (Jones 2011) an article on a series of pieces by performance artist Marina Abramovic in MOMA New York, Jones reaffirms her view on how performance is never unmediated, by showing how Abramovic’s performative

re-enactments demonstrated an interplay between performance and performance documentation<sup>140</sup>. As an example, Jones' account of Abramovic's process of re-enacting a piece by performance artist Valie Export challenges the idea that performance precedes documentation. Export's performance, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968)<sup>141</sup> reportedly<sup>142</sup> happened in a movie theatre and was never documented. The only documentation that relates to the performance is a photograph depicting Export, but taken at a later moment. Thus, when aiming to re-enact the piece in *Seven Easy Pieces: Action Pants: Genital Panic* (2005)<sup>143</sup>, Abramovic inquired about the original performance. However, when her research proved inconclusive, she chose to re-enact the existing documentation of the performance, rather than reproduce the performing act as it had been narrated. Jones, however, states that the piece might not have even been performed at all, because it exists primarily as a narrative that supports a document — Export's photograph:

In this extraordinary case, we seem to have “evidence” (again one must be careful in claiming “facts”) that the original artist, EXPORT, performatively enacted through discourse and photographic imagery a “performance” that never took place as mythically described. (Jones 2011, 29)

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<sup>140</sup> For Jones, the performance *The Artist is Present*, by Marina Abramovic, MOMA, New York, March 14, 2010, became exemplary of how liveness can, in fact, compromise and become destructive of presence: “Paradoxically, Abramovic's recent practice, in its desire to manifest presence, points to the very fact that the live act itself destroys presence (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident). The live act marks the body, understood as an expression of the self, as representational. [...] But the event, the performance, by combining materiality and durationality (its enacting of the body as always already escaping into the past) points to the fact that there is no “presence” as such.” (Jones 2011, 18) and “I felt this paradox strongly as a visitor at *The Artist is Present*. This paradox haunts performance studies and other discourses (such as art history) seeking to find ways to historicize and theorize — to exhibit and sell — live performance art.” (Jones 2011, 18)

<sup>141</sup> *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, by Valie Export, Munich, Germany, 1968

<sup>142</sup> Export's account is that she has roamed amidst spectators in a movie-theatre with the same crotchless trousers that she displays in the photo documentation, exposing her genitalia on the level of the spectators' eyes. For Jones' account of the re-enacting of *Action Pants: Genital Panic* by Abramovic see: Amelia Jones, “*The Artist is Present*” (2011) p.28-30

<sup>143</sup> *Seven Easy Pieces: Action Pants: Genital Panic* by Marina Abramovic, New York: Guggenheim Museum, November 11, 2005

The question of whether or not *Action Pants: Genital Panic* occurred may also be asked regarding its “original” audience. In her re-enactment, Abramovic aimed at a living, co-present audience, but Export’s positing of a photograph as the trace of this performance seems to imply a non-physical, constitutionally absent audience whose appearance will always be deferred to the future<sup>144</sup>. In fact, Jones’ analysis suggests that Export’s photo, which was seen as the re-enactment of a performance that was lost in time, can in fact be thought of as a performative document, the original materialisation and departing point of the artwork. In this way, the audience of Export’s performance would have to be, firstly, the audience of the photographic document.

My interest in introducing how Jones questions the antecedence of the live performance over the documented performance is in making apparent how this question implies a challenging of a view of co-presence as unmediated. Drawing attention to the fact that the perception of presence is not a given of performance but it is a historically bound notion, Jones highlights that, even when being co-present with a performance, we do not have unmediated access to what is (made) present. In this regard, there appears to be no absolute distinction between a performance and the mediation of a performance, such as its documentation. In the following, I continue this line of reasoning by introducing how Philip Auslander has proposed a similar view about the mediation of presence but in regards to the notion of liveness.

#### Philip Auslander

Auslander has reflected on the relation between the eventfulness of a performance and the mediations at play in perceiving such performance in the book *Liveness* (1999). In a similar way to Jones, he problematises the issue of the precedence between a performance event and its documentation, also arguing that a document can be, in itself, performative. This idea is also present in the article “The

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<sup>144</sup> See also Auslander; “the crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance but the one between the document and its audience. Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological.” (Auslander 2006, 7-9) The possibility of thinking about the performativity of performance documentation has two implications that help frame theatre without actors: firstly, a kind of spectatorship that is also “temporally” apart from the performative event and of its performers (as in the examples of the digital doubles of Marleau, Verdonck and Paré); and, secondly, that it becomes possible to account for the agency of non-human entities such as medial devices and material artefacts as being performative.

Performativity of Performance Documentation” (Auslander 2006) where he discusses the notion of “theatrical” documentation. In his article, Auslander proposes a distinction between two categories of performance documentation: the first kind, considered as “documentary”, refers to documentation of performances that happened, while the second kind of performance documentation, considered as “theatrical” refers to documentation that fabricates the impression that a performance has happened<sup>145</sup>. In this case, there is a reversal of the primacy of the event over its documentation — the quality of “theatrical” appearing to correspond to the quality of “simulation”. In this way, Auslander suggests an inversion of the ontological relation between performance and its documentation arguing that “the crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance but the one between the document and its audience” (Auslander 2006, 7). In this way, Auslander’s view about performance and documentation extends his own reflections in the 1990’s, on what is implied in rethinking the notion of liveness. In his view, liveness is not a given of performance but a notion that has been historically and culturally constructed.

In *Liveness*, Auslander refers to two aspects that challenge a view of liveness as an unmediated notion: one, in response to Phelan’s positing of ephemerality as ontological property of performance; and other, by observing changes in the meaning of “live” in the migration of the word from the field of theatre to television. Regarding the first aspect, Auslander argues that, similar to Phelan’s account of performance, recorded material also tends to disappear as it is “performed”, for example, a video tape. In this way, media traces can also be abridged by an “ontology of disappearance”, in the same way as the transient bodies in performance:

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<sup>145</sup> Auslander gives concrete examples that illustrate each category: “consider two familiar images from the history of performance and body art: one from the documentation of Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971), the notorious piece for which the artist had a friend shoot him in a gallery, and Yves Klein’s famous *Leap into the Void* (1960), which shows the artist jumping out of a second-story window into the street below. It is generally accepted that the first image is a piece of performance documentation, but what is the second? Burden really was shot in the arm during *Shoot*, but Klein did not really jump unprotected out the window, [...] In the theatrical category, I would place a host of art works of the kind sometimes called “performed photography,” ranging from Marcel Duchamp’s photos of himself as *Rrose Selavy* to Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself in various guises to Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* films. [...] Although it is true that the theatrical images in the second category either had no significant audience other than the camera [...] it is equally true that the images in both categories were staged for the camera.” (Auslander 2006, 1-3)

Disappearance, existence only in the present moment is not, then, an ontological quality of live performance that distinguishes itself from odes of technical reproduction [...] In a very literal, material sense, televisual reproductions like live performances, become themselves through disappearance [...] Like live performance, electronic and photographic media can be described meaningfully as partaking of the ontology of disappearance ascribed to live performance. (Auslander 1999, 45, 51)

Appropriating Phelan's view of performance's ontology, Auslander reinforces the quality of disappearance in ephemerality to argue the following: media traces must also be seen to be affected by the same time-based nature as performance, that is as affected by a continuous drift into disappearance. The quality of ephemeral physicality ascribed by Phelan as an exclusionary aspect of live performance can in fact be acknowledged also in mediatised forms.

The second aspect noted by Auslander as challenging an account of liveness as unmediated is how the notion is appropriated from the field of theatre and into the field of television. While the notion of "live" was traditionally part of a theatrical vocabulary, it has become also part of the vocabulary in television broadcasting, to refer to a transmission between two locations in simultaneous time, in other words, in a condition of timely co-presence. Auslander remarks that "Television's essence was seen in its ability to transmit events as they occur, not in a filmic capacity to record events for later viewing. Originally, all television broadcasts were live transmissions" (Auslander 1999, 12). However, this appropriation of the notion of liveness in television implied also a reformulation of an important principle of theatrical liveness: the relation of co-presence between actors and spectators, sharing the same space at the same time. In live television broadcasts, a relation of co-presence is also established but as the transmission happens between two distinct locations, only time is simultaneous, generating a tele-presence. With the progressive development and accessibility of video technology from the 1980's onwards, the same possibility of live transmission is also experimented in theatre<sup>146</sup>. However, in this context, not

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<sup>146</sup> Auslander thinks of the notion of liveness as an object of a "remediation" that is, as an object that has been transferred between mediums, causing a transformation in how it is perceived. In this case, he is tracing how liveness was remediated from theatre to television, and from a televisual medium such as video to theatre. The term remediation was discussed by Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

only was space manipulated but also the perception of time (for example, the time of recording and the time of broadcasting) together with the idea of human presence. Theatre and performance art pieces exploring the potential of technology in these ways demonstrated that the layering of mediations complicates the perception of liveness as an unmediated relation. In fact, to Auslander, mediatised forms of performance determined the need to overcome an account of performance as ontologically defined by present time and physical presence, and in opposition to mediated time and presence.

I am suggesting further that thinking about the relationship between live and mediated forms in terms of ontological oppositions is not especially productive [...] To understand the relationship between live and mediated forms, it is necessary to investigate that relationship as historical and contingent, not as ontologically given or technologically determined. (Auslander 1999, 51)

Auslander's statement points towards an approach that resists the assumption that liveness is unmediated, or that such an immediacy is a given of performance. Rather, the establishment of the notion of liveness is historically contingent, and should be regarded beyond dualisms opposing presence and absence, as our relation to performances is never unmediated. As Copeland remarks, "The on-going critique of theatrical presence is also valuable insofar as it reminds us that no experience (no matter how 'live') is entirely unmediated" (Copeland 1990, 42). In this way, approaching the notion of liveness reveals how its conceptual construction also involves modes of spectatorial gaze and of perceptive experience. Although Auslander's remarks do not address pieces without actors, his rethinking of the notion of liveness beyond the dualism opposing immediacy and mediation is an important step in thinking about presence in theatre beyond the physical co-extensivity of audience and actors. Locating the notion of liveness as a cultural concept, rather than as an essential aspect to define theatre or performance, expands the notion and raises questions on how a sense of liveness is perceived in mediatised forms of performing.

In this section I have shown that in their resistance to defining theatre and performance through the ephemerality of human presence, the arguments of Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander regarding technology and mediation can be seen as promoting new modes of thinking about human and non-human presence on stage, and rethinking about co-presence in the theatre beyond spatial co-extensivity and

simultaneous time of actors and spectators. By putting forth arguments that challenge the idea that theatre is defined by an ephemeral relation of co-presence and that this relation is unmediated, the modification to thinking about theatre opens the way to considering theatre beyond the presence of actors, and provide significant frames of reference and historical precedents to its emergence from 2000. In the following, I continue this approach, introducing how views on theatricality in the 1990's contribute to thinking about theatre in non-theatrical environments, allowing for the possibility of theatre without actors.

### **Expanding Disciplinary Limits Through Views About Theatricality**

In this section, I engage with texts from the 1990's about theatricality, and consider how they expanded views about theatre in general and opened the possibility of thinking of theatre beyond actors. The “theatrical” is not a clearly demarcated notion within Theatre Studies but one that has been appropriated in different ways such as in the following three aspects: by addressing anti-theatrical prejudices that see theatre as a practice of illusion and deception, or criticise the material constraints of theatrical staging as harmful to the creation of artworks; by addressing instances in which plays and performances expose a meta-theatrical dimension, allowing for reflections on the medium itself; or by addressing aspects that may seem to refer to theatre outside of the theatre context, inquiring about the “properties” of theatre — to use an ontological jargon — which could be acknowledged as theatrical in non-theatrical situations. For example, these non-theatrical situations could be found in other art forms, or in relation with daily life realities<sup>147</sup>. In this section, I will focus on this latest account of theatricality, about what persists as theatrical when material elements of theatre are not in play, such as actors, and theatre can be seen to occur, for example, in a real-life setting.

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<sup>147</sup> Among others, the issue of theatricality was object of reflection in a number of edited volumes, such as: in the journal *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1995) edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte; as well as in *SubStance*, Vol. 31, No. 2&3 (2002) edited by Josette Féral; or Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait in *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Samuel Weber in *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) and Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (eds) in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Considering this perspective on theatricality, I introduce selected writings by Féral, Fischer-Lichte and Rozik. I underline two perspectives that are expressed in their texts which I consider to be relevant to the study of theatre without actors. The first perspective pertains to the reinstatement that actors and a relation of co-presence between them and an audience are fundamental to defining theatre, also outside of theatre. The second perspective refers to a view on interchanges between theatre and reality where “acting” is seen in an expanded way: deflected from the presence of human actors, an interdisciplinary theatricality becomes anchored on the spectator’s gaze, and may include the agency of non-humans. This expands theatre beyond theatrical spaces and dramatic texts and into forms of speculative and perceptive experimentation. In the same way that theatricality becomes tenable beyond theatre, acting becomes imaginable beyond actors. This becomes apparent when considering the many examples of contemporary theatre without actors presented in the first chapter, where the absence of professional human actors allows, on the one hand, the reworking of conditions of spectating theatre in real-life environments and, on the other hand, the reworking of the conditions of agency of both human and non-human actors, within forms of staging the spectatorial gaze or the givens of the real.

Josette Féral

In the article “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language” (Féral 2002), in a section on “Stage-Related Theatricality”, Féral claims that “theater is possible only because theatricality exists and because the theater calls it into play.” (Féral 2002, 99) Féral considers theatricality to be captured and enhanced in theatre plays, within a system where the actor is the privileged signifier, rather than constituting a property of theatre itself. As Féral writes,

The actor’s presence alone is enough to assure that theatricality will be preserved and that the theatrical act will take place—proof that the actor is one of the indispensable elements in the production of stage-related theatricality. The actor is simultaneously the producer of theatricality and the channel through which it passes. He encodes it, and inscribes it with signs within symbolic structures on stage that are informed by his subjective impulses and desires. (Féral 2002, 99, 100)

For Féral, the stage-related theatricality referred above is produced by elements used on stage, where the agency of the actor “alone is enough to assure that theatricality”. However, in a section entitled “Theatricality as a Property of the Quotidian” (*ibid.*, 95), Féral introduces three “scenarios” in which theatricality can be acknowledged: the first presents the possibility of a spectator seated in an empty theatre before a play begins. Although nothing appears to be happening in this scenario, the space is in fact already perceived as theatrical. In the second scenario, Féral presents a spectator as witness to a discussion in the subway, only to later learn that the discussion was staged. This prompts the question of whether the spectator is only able to perceive theatricality when being aware of a “theatrical intention” (*ibid.*, 96). Within the third scenario presented by Féral, a spectator watches passers-by from the sidewalk. This is a scenario where although there is no theatrical intention, the viewer may still perceive how certain people and certain situations bear theatricality. Following her presentation of these three scenarios, Féral then proceeds to summarise these ideas in a conclusion:

we can draw an important conclusion from it: theatricality has little to do with the nature of the invested object — the actor, space, object, or event — nor is it necessarily the result of pretense, illusion, make-believe, or fiction. More than a property with analyzable characteristics, theatricality seems to be a process that has to do with a “gaze” [...] in fact, we might call it a process that recognizes subjects in process; it is a process of looking at or being looked at. (Féral 2002, 97, 98)

According to Féral’s account, theatricality is not a given component of the elements of stage, but results from the constitution of the spectator’s gaze. Moving away from the properties of theatre, Féral also moves away from an ontological approach based on defining a being by its properties. Féral proposes that theatricality should be seen as disconnected from the material properties of theatre — such as the actor — and ought to be seen as a process, a process of exchange between “looking at or being looked at”, a process that constitutes subjects that look and are looked at. In this regard, Féral’s account suggests dislocating theatricality from the agency of material aspects of theatre to a process of constituting the spectatorial gaze. This argument paves the way towards the possibility of theatricality without actors because

her view on how theatricality lies in the eyes of the beholder<sup>148</sup>, rather than “in the nature of the invested object”, allows the possibility of staging theatre beyond the acting of actors. This possibility is, indeed, proposed in relation to her first scenario, where a spectator looks upon the empty stage:

a semiotization of space has already occurred, the spectator perceives the theatricality of the stage, and of the space surrounding him. We can therefore draw a first conclusion: the presence of the actor is not a prerequisite of theatricality. In this instance, space is the vehicle of theatricality. (Féral 2002, 96)

According to Féral, in the absence of the actor, who is a preferred vehicle for theatricality, space becomes what makes theatricality function — and perhaps “vehicle” may, in fact, correspond, to “agent”. In this way, Féral indicates that “the presence of the actor is not a prerequisite” for theatricality to be enacted. This means that, although theatricality is seen as a process of defining phenomenological instances of theatre, such defining instances may exclude the presence of actors.

#### Erika Fischer-Lichte, on Theatricality

Fischer-Lichte places similar importance in the presence of the actor as a producer of signs. In “Theatricality: a Key Concept In Theatre and Cultural Studies,” within her book *Semiotics of Theater* (Fischer-Lichte 1992), Fischer-Lichte summarises her view:

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<sup>148</sup> In this regard, it is worthy to mention Bleeker’s urge for a rethinking of the “disembodied I/eye” of the spectators, towards becoming something that implicates the spectator beyond its ability to see (a performance). As Bleeker notes “Famously (or infamously) the conventional theatre set-up, putting the audience in the dark in front a brightly lit stage confirms modes of perceiving of the so-called disembodied I/eye, the (supposedly) passive observer of a world existing independently from her perceptual engagement with it. The aesthetic logic of the dramatic theatre (characterised by Lehman (1999) as logocentric and teleological) supports a sense of the world that exists as perceptual unity independent of our perception of it.” (Bleeker 2010, 38) Féral’s account addresses an active “observer of a world existing” interdependently with “her perceptual engagement”, exacerbating this disembodied I/eye of the spectator to a point in which it becomes not passive but rather a participant.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre* [...] I have argued that in a certain sense, theatre involves the ‘doubling up’ of the culture in which it is played: the signs engendered by theatre denote the signs produced by the corresponding cultural systems. Theatrical signs are therefore always signs of signs. (Fischer-Lichte 1992, 87)

According to Fischer-Lichte, theatrical signs “denote” signs of its own culture. To “denote” means that a sign is indicated, but it also implies that a meaning is conveyed, that is mediated through the act of denoting. In this way, the performing of theatre can be understood to “double” an existing reality. Regarding the actor, then, Fischer-Lichte indicates that the importance of its performance lies less in its presence but more in an ability to “be used as sign of sign”.

a human body can indeed be replaced by another body or even an object, and an object can be replaced by another random object or a human body because in their capacity as theatrical signs, they can signify one another. The material existence of the human body is not of interest to the theatre because of its uniqueness nor its specific functionality alone, but foremost in terms of its ability to be used as a sign of sign. (Fischer-Lichte 1992, 87)

Fischer-Lichte attributes the function of “denoting” meaning almost exclusively to the actor. Unlike Féral, she does not acknowledge that the theatrical space alone is coded in a way that generates “a sign of a sign”. However, Fischer-Lichte seems to arrive at a similar conclusion with regards to perceiving theatricality within daily-life, non-theatrical realities. Fischer-Lichte posits that if the generation of theatricality is not dependent on a theatrical milieu<sup>149</sup>, then it can happen in the very cultural systems where signs are produced, prior to being taken as signs of signs within the framework of theatre. This amounts to say that beyond the actor, the theatrical

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<sup>149</sup> “In the search for analytic strategies recently developed in other disciplines, theatre historians and theoreticians find themselves confronted with a puzzling situation. Many studies in philosophy and psychology, in anthropology, ethnology and sociology, in political, historical and communication sciences, in cultural semiotics, in the history of art and literature employ the concept of theatre as a heuristic model to a wide extent. [...] For, in order to be able to delineate the distinctive features of theatre history as a discipline, a certain consensus regarding the object whose so-called history is being explored and written up must be reached. Yet there is no reason to assume that such a consensus actually exists.” (Fischer-Lichte 1992, 85)

space can be seen as a space where the reality of a cultural system is being performed — which, for Fischer-Lichte is an empowering possibility.

This approach, which was primarily semiotic, evolved in another direction in her book *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre* (Fischer-Lichte 1997). In this book, Fischer-Lichte considers that if the exchange between theatre and a cultural reality is established on the level of signs, then the constitution of meaning is, in both cases, dependent of conditions of perception. As she writes:

in theatre as well as in everyday life we construct our own reality, proceeding from our perception of more or less the same kind of material (human beings in an environment) [...] Thus, theatre turns out to be a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for and the possibilities of constructing reality. [...] by reflecting [on] theatricality, the spectators reflect on the conditions underlying and guiding the process by which they construct reality. (Fischer-Lichte 1997, 71, 72)

In Fischer-Lichte's account, it is possible to establish a parallel between theatre and reality through "our perception of more or less the same kind of material (human beings in an environment)". Departing from a semiotic approach, Fischer-Lichte concludes that the theatrical experience can provide "conditions" for spectators to reflect on how one perceives and constructs reality. This perspective of Fischer-Lichte reveals a different direction from her position about co-presence, shown above, where she gives a minimal account of unmediated co-presence as fundamental to the definition of theatre. Her account about how theatre can rehearse conditions of perception is actually in line with many of the examples of theatre without actors from "Chapter 1", where a number of strategies — sightseeing, reading, staging things or animals, staging non-actors — engaged with staging reality in the theatre or with staging a theatrical view within real life settings.

Eli Rozik

In "Acting: The Quintessence of Theatricality" (Rozik 2002), Rozik establishes an expanded view on acting by taking on a semiotic approach. In his text, Rozik departs by grounding his arguments in the idea that all that is shown on stage is a "deflection of reference" (Rozik 2002, 119), which Rozik explains through the following analogy: "even if a table [on stage] is painted on canvas, it describes a fictional

table [...] a real table on stage always enacts a table which is not itself". (*ibid.*, 118, 119)  
From here, Rozik opens the possibility that if all stage elements are not to meant to be seen for what they are, but rather refer to something else, then there is no reason for human actors to be performing such reference, since:

Widening the extension of the notion of "acting" reveals that this is shared by all objects on stage, including, but not necessarily, human bodies. In other words, in theater, the principle of acting is more widely materialized than usually thought, and includes human and non-human actors, made objects and even conventional signs. Thus I conclude that it is *acting* or *enacting* a fictional entity coupled with similarity on the material that constitutes the essential quality of theater or theatricality. (*ibid.*, 123)

This approach is fundamentally essentialist, and the grounds of Rozik's argument dismiss a discussion about ontology, mediation and the perception of materiality. However, Rozik's call for an expanded view of acting is in line with Féral's positing of the spectatorial gaze and with Fischer-Lichte's view on theatricality as an exercise in reality-making. Moreover, Rozik's view demonstrates how the possibility of withdrawing actors was envisioned in the 1990's within the context of discourses about theatricality.

Theatricality was approached, at the time, from a diversity of perspectives concerning, for instance: how dramatic plays elicit a sense of theatricality (as referred to by Elinor Fuchs<sup>150</sup>); looking at how the notion of theatricality was appropriated within other art fields (as referred to by Michael Fried<sup>151</sup>); exploring how the usage of the word "theatricality" implied anti-theatricalist feelings (as referred to by Martin Puchner<sup>152</sup>); or researching how theatricality related to the notion of performativity (as referred to by Janelle Reinelt<sup>153</sup>). It is hard to pinpoint clear outcomes stemming from this diversity of approaches, however, in what concerns this study, there are

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150 Elinor Fuchs, "Clown Shows: Anti-Theatricalist Theatricalism in Four Twentieth-Century Plays" in *Against Theatre*, 2007

151 Michael Fried, in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980)

152 Martin Puchner in *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002)

153 Janelle Reinelt, "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity meets Theatricality", in *SubStance* Vol. 31, Nos. 2&3 (2002)

two significant aspects that are worthy of consideration from the contributions of Féral, Fischer-Lichte and Rozik. The first aspect concerns how theatricality was seen as a way of understanding theatre in non-theatrical settings, such as in relation with other artistic practices as well as within real-life environments. The second aspect is that, in doing so, their views about theatricality dislocated the possibility of theatrical agency from the acting of the actor to the constitution of the spectatorial gaze and to the possibility of acting by non-humans. This dislocation is the beginning point of the discourses presented in the following section, about ecological theatre and forms of staging the real. As it will be pointed out, an ecological view of theatre implies the development of modes of exchange between what is theatrical and non-theatrical. This can be seen, for example, in forms of staging the real that often make use of forms of expanded acting and of forming the spectatorial gaze.

### **“Ecological Theatre” and the Staging of the Real**

As indicated in the main introduction of this study, today there are multiple forms of staging the real, with or without actors. Some of those forms include verbatim theatre, site-specific theatre, community-based theatre, participatory performances, theatre with non-actors, performances staging animals or natural phenomena. In this section, I show how a set of discourses within the fields of theatre and performance studies of the 1990's challenged notions of unmediated co-presence, by referring to works engaging with nature and, particularly, engaging with the notion of “ecology”. This engagement could serve as a metaphor for dramatic writing and staging, as well as a literal space of staging that affected all the components of a performance. As it will be shown, the emergence of an ecological approach to the theatre in the 1990's demonstrates the emergence of an expansion of the understanding of what theatre can be beyond an essentialist definition of co-presence, and that is most relevant in regard to theatre without actors. As it will be pointed out, views about “ecological” forms of theatre in the 1990's can be seen as background to subsequent practices of staging reality, such as those where there are no professional actors or human performers. In order to introduce this subject, I refer to texts by Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs, and Hans-Thies Lehmann.

### Chaudhuri, Fuchs: Ecological Theatre and Landscape

Chaudhuri and Fuchs published an article each in the Spring/ Summer issue of *Theatre* in 1994 in a section dedicated to “Theater and Ecology”<sup>154</sup>. In “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater”, Chaudhuri details a number of cases that chart the field of ecological practice of theatre, that is, of practices that, in her view, engage with the notion of nature. As Chaudhuri notes, this engagement is often either referring to nature in a metaphorical way or, on the contrary, engaging with nature in a literal way. One example that Chaudhuri highlights as a metaphorical and superficial approach is that of Naturalist theatre. In her view, the interest of Naturalist theatre in social realities and in staging aspects of real life was, in fact, affirming a human-centred view that superimposed over nature.

By defining human existence as a seamless social web, naturalism was unwittingly acting out 19th-century humanism’s historical hostility to ecological realities. Though its thematics kept in touch with nature through images of cherry orchards, wild ducks, and polluted baths, the ideological discourse of realism thrust the nonhuman world into the shadows, from which it emerged in the ghostlike form of strangely menacing-yet inanimate-objects. (Chaudhuri 1994, 24)

In this way, Chaudhuri makes clear that she wishes to address the notions of nature and of ecology as a theatrical and performative practice and not as a point of reference in artistic works. Her interest lies in accounting for artistic practices that concretely engage with nature and elicit ecological views, that is, views about the relation between humans and non-humans in an expanded understanding of their common environments. However, she acknowledges that there is a fundamental problem of these practices, in that they “exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely, again, 19th-century humanism) that is, as I shall argue below, programmatically anti-ecological” (Chaudhuri 1994, 24). As a response to this issue, Chaudhuri points out that a possible solution may lie in site-specificity.

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<sup>154</sup> Una Chaudhuri, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theatre”, *Theater*, Vol. 25 No. 1 (1994), pp. 23-31 and Elinor Fuchs, “Play as Landscape: Another Version of Pastoral”. *Theater*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1994), pp. 44-51. This double feature was followed by a collaboration in their jointly edited volume *Land/ Scape/Theater*, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (eds.), *Land/Scape/ Theater* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2002)

One solution to this problem is to join ecological concerns with the protocols of “site specific” theater, creating works that directly engage the actual ecological problems of particular environments [...] that outline of a new materialist-ecological theater practice that refuses the universalization and metaphorization of nature”. (Chaudhuri 1994, 24)

To Chaudhuri, forms of ecological theatre have the potential to reimagine modes of staging theatrical space and acting. An ecological view, particularly a literal engagement, modifies theatre practices through considering how they can become site-specific, community-based or involving the participation of the audience: “Theater ecology, I believe, will call for a turn towards the literal, a programmatic resistance to the use of nature as metaphor” (Chaudhuri 1994, 29). Such expanding of the theatrical space and of modes of acting suggests that the theatre play is seen as part of an environment that combines humans and non-humans: “Are we human beings — and our activities, such as theater — an integral part of nature, or are we somehow radically separate from it? The question underlies any effort to define an environmental ethics, to conceptualize our moral responsibility for the nonhuman”. (*ibid.*, 27)

In the same issue as Chaudhuri, Fuchs presented the article “Play as Landscape: Another Version of Pastoral” — which, later became a chapter in her book *The Death of Character* (Fuchs 1996). In this chapter, Fuchs departs from the notion of “landscape” as proposed by North-American writer Gertrude Stein<sup>155</sup> to observe cases of plays that, in her view, developed a dramaturgical sense of landscape. In these examples,

the human figure, instead of providing perspectival unity to a stage whose setting acts as backdrop and visual support, is treated as an element in what

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<sup>155</sup> “The progenitor of the idea of play as landscape was Gertrude Stein, but its proliferation may be attributed to the mid-century directors who brought back forms of choral staging, including Brecht, Grotowski, Brook, and the Living Theatre. An important epistemological role must be assigned to Beckett, who in [*Waiting for*] *Godot* and then in *Endgame*, pushed to their almost parodic conclusions (implosions one might say) the two dominant dramaturgical and staging models — panoramic and concentrated — of the Western tradition.” (Fuchs 1996, 92)

See also Marranca in *Ecologies of Theatre*, 1996 on the notion of landscape argued by Stein: “In her 1934 essay ‘Plays’ [...] Stein attempted to explain what she meant by considering a play and landscape. [...] ‘a landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into my landscape the things that were there’ [...] This pictorial composition replaces dramatic action, emphasizing frontality and the frame, flatness and the absence of perspective. The play is just there. It has no center. Whatever you find in it depends on your way of looking.” (Marranca 1996, 7)

might be described as a theatrical landscape. Correspondingly the spectator's focus on this stage is no longer convergent: it is darting or diffuse, noting some configurations, missing others, or absorbing all in a heterogeneous gaze. (Fuchs 1996, 92)

And,

There are, of course, human figures on these natural/ conceptual landscapes, but the landscape itself is the central object of contemplation. (Fuchs 1996, 12)

Fuchs proposes to overcome the idea of character as a central dramaturgical principle, with the idea of "landscape". In this way, the transformation and dissolution of the human character<sup>156</sup> in the surrounding landscape is relevant because it destabilises the overall structuring of dramaturgy and performing. Significantly, in a theatre where the character is absent, the subject becomes displaced from the central position as the producer of meaning. The subject becomes diluted or camouflaged within a visual and dramaturgical environment, where any substratum of human presence is no longer embodied by the discourse of a fictional, dramatic character. Instead, it is discourse itself that appears to become material and embodied on stage<sup>157</sup>.

Earlier, in 1985, in the article "Presence and the Revenge of Writing" (Fuchs 1985), Fuchs argues how, at the time, an emergence of writing on stage "as subject, activity and artefact" (Fuchs 1985, 163) was questioning how the presence of the body of the performer was assumed as a fundamental and central aspect of theatre and performance. In Fuchs' view, the influence of post-modern deconstructionist

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<sup>156</sup> "What happens to the presentation of time and space when we are no longer in a theater of character, when the human figure is no longer the single, perspectival "point" of stage performance? [...] on the landscape stage time is emptied into space. This spatial stage is almost a necessary consequence of the waning of interest in character moving through narrative." (Fuchs 1996, 12)

<sup>157</sup> "The text has become an actor [...] In the games now being enacted in the electronic coils of virtual reality is emerging a much more radical theater of reading and writing than any performed on the stage, for it is a theater that presents no visual images to the eye, but only advancing scrolls of words. The players in these theaters are creating cybernetic dramas that push notions of 'presence' into new, disembodied, territories." (Fuchs 1996, 91) This quote relates also with performances of readership described in "Chapter 1", in which, as Fuchs puts it, "The artists of performance theater don't merely haunt presence-structure with trace-structure, they directly stage the traces. Writing becomes 'presentable'." (Fuchs 1996, 80)

philosophies led to a shift from a kind of theatre that privileged presence towards a “theatre of absence”. As Fuchs writes,

A decade or more later, the work of this next generation of theatre artists and theoreticians has increasingly been marked by an aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence. We can now see that the radical Presence of the earlier generation was only an extreme version of the traditional theatrical Presence that has always banished textuality per se, and enshrined the (apparently) spontaneous speaking character at the center of action. The earlier generation, while declaring, with Beck that “the Theatre of Character is over, was still carrying out the Renaissance humanist program of Cartesian self-centered signification. A theatre of Absence, by contrast, disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilizes meaning. (Fuchs 1985, 165)

For Fuchs, claiming the end of “the Theatre of Character” while leaving the underlying notion of human presence unchallenged was merely reifying a notion of human self as the “center of action” and locus of signification. In contrast, “an aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence” allows both “dispers[ing] the center” and “displac[ing] the subject.” Within the particular context of postmodern performance of the time, Fuchs notes how the dissolution of the dramatic character constituted, not only a resistance to text, but implied a dissolution of a theatrical “self”. She associated this theatrical self with physical presence, which affects the subjectivity of both actors and spectators in their relationship of co-presence. The analysis of the displacement of the subject within post-modern theatre later came to embody the core thesis of Fuchs’ book *The Death of Character* (Fuchs 1996), where she deepens the implications of a deconstructivist critique of presence to the fragmentation of the dramatic character in theatre:

A cultural “death of character” — shorthand for an explosion of doubt about ontological grounding — necessarily brings about an expansion of the theatrical term. The theatrical became a protected arena for the exploration and playing out of difference, a kind of substitute grounding for the postmodern soul. (Fuchs 1996, 14)

The disappearance of the dramatic character affects the structure of theatrical works because they cease to be centred around portraying dramatic characters, their

thoughts and actions. Fuchs observes how the dramatic character was no longer a homogeneous discourse of the self. Her analysis of the withdrawal of the dramatic character within the context of post-modern theatre constitutes an important reference for theatre without actors because she identifies a fragmentation of post-modern subjectivity that allows new configurations of human and non-human presence in theatre. Given that the idea of landscape is taken as a reference of an un-centred relation, a theatrical work that is perceived as a landscape allows for elements other than fictional characters to relate, challenging an account of co-presence exclusively based on the relation between actors and audience<sup>158</sup>. Furthermore, it elicits new modes of phenomenological perception of the theatre as landscape and of the landscape as theatre.

I experimentally suggest that a performance genre has emerged that encourages and relies on the faculty of landscape surveyal. [...] This genre relies on the phenomenological landscape-perception that Stein pioneered, but is never far from the imagery of actual landscape, which, as we saw in Stein, asserts itself when spatiality begins to emerge over temporality as a theatrical value. [...] In this way, and in a variety of others, postmodern theater artists hint at the possibility of a post-anthropocentric stage. (Fuchs 1996, 106-7)

The view that pieces engaging metaphorically and literally with nature entail the possibility of a “post-anthropocentric stage” is, in my view, a key indicator of how early discourses about theatre and ecology in the 1990’s composed a background for theatre without actors in the 2000’s. Expanding on Fuchs’ “experimental suggestion” that theatre plays about/ in landscapes constitute a genre of its own, I would like to introduce how, in the account of Lehmann, works that further the literal engagement with nature constitute forms of staging the real.

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<sup>158</sup> “because we are interested in the entire field, the whole terrain, the total environment of the performance, as performance, and as imaginative construct. We are no more transported to another world than we banish all other worlds (this latter being the somewhat stultifying claim for ‘presence’ made by some performance art theorists)”. (Fuchs 1996, 106-7)

### Lehmann: Theatre of Perceptibility

Although Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (Lehman 2006) was translated into English only in 2006, in fact, it was originally published in German in 1999, and it is possible to align this work with discourses of the 1990's reviewing changes in theatre and drama within a post-modernist approach. Within the chapter "Panorama of Post-Dramatic Theatre", and in the subchapter "Performance Text", Lehmann looks at modes of performing that accentuate an engagement with a surrounding reality, and a co-presence with its concreteness and materialities. Some of the sections are entitled "Physicality", "Concrete Theatre", "Irruption of the Real" or "Event/ Situation". In the examples discussed in these sections, spectators are not shown a representation but are immersed in an environment. Following this view, Lehmann introduces the term "perceptibility", so as to describe the experience of the spectatorial gaze as well as to indicate how theatre makers formalise modes of perceiving through strategies of staging the real:

It is not the content but the formalization itself that constitutes the challenge [...] In a frame of meaning that has become porous, the concrete, sensuously intensified perceptibility comes to the fore. This term, 'perceptibility', captures the virtual and incompletable nature of the theatrical perception that is produced or at least intended here. (Lehmann 2006, 99)

Lehmann's language in this section appears to be challenged by a limit: considering that the "content" became less important in formalising the theatrical performance, Lehmann explains how the "porous", "concrete and sensuous" demarcate a new horizon of theatrical experience. Faced with the "virtual and incompletable nature" of perception, Lehmann proposes that a kind of performance that works in the threshold of theatre and reality necessarily implies a devising of "perceptibility". In the section "Irruption of the Real" (Lehmann 2006, 99), Lehmann uses the word "irruption" to refer to pieces where an aspect of reality "irrupted" in the contained fictional cosmos of dramatic plays, and becomes "explicitly into a 'co-player'" (*ibid.*, 100).

The postdramatic theatre is the first to turn the level of the real explicitly into a 'co-player' — and this on a practical, not just theoretical level. The irruption of the real becomes an object not just of reflection (as in Romanticism) but of the theatrical design itself [...] Aesthetically and conceptually the real

in theatre has always been excluded but it inevitably adheres to theatre. [...] It is not the occurrence of anything 'real' as such but its self-reflexive use that characterizes the aesthetic of postdramatic theatre. The aesthetic cannot be understood through a determination of content [...] but solely by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct. (*ibid.*, 100-103)

As seen in the quote above, "contiguity" and "adherence" are modes that, in Lehmann's view, account for the relation between post-dramatic theatre and reality. In his view, theatre relates with the real in a relation of contiguity, that is, of bordering and of proximity; and in a relation of adherence, that is, of temporary contact. In this way, it is not "the occurrence of anything 'real' that determines "the aesthetic of post-dramatic theatre" but, as Lehmann indicates, a "self-reflexive use" of reality. This also means engaging with what is "undecided" about the real, with its "state of potentiality"<sup>159</sup>. Lehmann writes: "The main point is not the assertion of the real as such [...] but the unsettling that occurs through the undecidability whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. The theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from this ambiguity" (*ibid.*, 101). From here it matters to expound upon the notion of "theatre of perceptibility" as argued by Lehmann:

what one sees and hears remains in a state of potentiality, its appropriation postponed. It is in this sense that we are talking about a *theatre of perceptibility*. Postdramatic theatre emphasizes what is incomplete and incompletionable about it, so much so that it realizes its own 'phenomenology of perception' marked by an overcoming of the principles of mimesis and fiction. (*ibid.*, 99)

The idea of "perceptibility" follows Lehmann's argumentative line regarding the progressive turn towards an extreme staging of materialisation, within post-dramatic theatre. Such extreme staging of materialisation aims at dealing with perceptions of reality, beyond or devoid of a fictional approach<sup>160</sup>. However, for Lehmann, it

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<sup>159</sup> In this regard, Marranca notes: "The observer and the art object were not separate but interdependent, making art and life indistinguishable. In this way, both artists [Stein and Duchamp] welcomed the "ready-made", the everyday, into their works, becoming part of the century-long avant-garde search for the real." (Marranca 1996, 06)

<sup>160</sup> "Without the real there is no staging. Representation and presence, mimetic play and performance, the represented realities and the process of representation itself: from this structural

remains impossible to affirm that theatre succeeds in staging the real and, instead, it is only possible to speak of the “perceptibility” of the real. For Lehmann, this incompleteness is fundamental and allows for a disclosing of theatre’s own “phenomenology of perception”, aside from its ability for “mimesis and fiction”. In this regard, I think the approach of Lehmann is significant, showing how the issues that are problematized by forms of staging reality may be seen as modes of rehearsing phenomenological approaches to perception in theatre.

Here it becomes important to return to the examples of performances analysed in the first chapter to show how some cases follow this line of thought regarding the challenges of staging the real in a post-dramatic setting. For example, it is worth noting how, in the light of Lehmann’s concepts of “perceptibility” and of “undecidability”, the strategies of theatre without actors described in the first chapter, resort to existing strategies for mediating real life. In fact, it can be said that performances of theatre without actors do not aim at staging reality but at staging strategies that mediate reality, and that become the means for perceiving and participating in real-life environments. This is the case of some of the examples of the “Chapter 1”, namely within strategies of “staging spectators” or of “staging matter and gaze”. In these pieces, formal solutions such as touristic tours, audio-walks, enclosing objects to create exhibitions, looking through binoculars, interacting with the smartphone, or simply using a written text to instruct an action, are solutions that mediate the perception of the real. In these cases, the absencing of the actor conveys a staging of mediations of perceiving the real, rather than claiming to stage the real itself.

Reflections about the relation between theatre and nature, as well as practices of staging the real continued to be developed since the 1990’s. Within the contemporary field of the performing arts, strategies of staging the real are, today, seen to include works with “non-actors” as in forms of “documentary theatre”<sup>161</sup>, or with spectators as in forms of “immersive theatre”<sup>162</sup>. This tendency is also reflected in theatre and

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split the contemporary theatre has extracted a central element of the postdramatic paradigm – by radically thematizing it and by putting the real on equal footing with the fictive.” (Lehmann 2006, 103)

<sup>161</sup> For an overview of this specific approach in contemporary theatre see, for example, Carol Martin’s edited volumes: Carol Martin (ed.), “TDR/The Drama Review – Documentary Theatre”, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2006) and Carol Martin (ed), *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010)

<sup>162</sup> The expression “immersive theatre” alludes to the how these performances are devised to immerse the spectatorial gaze and agency, within a configured environment of participation or play, within theatrical or non-theatrical settings. See for example, results tagged as “immersive theatre” on

performance studies concerning literature such as *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (Giannachi and Stewart 2005), edited by Gabriela Giannachi and Nigel Stewart; *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Kershaw 2007), *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory 1990-2010* (Tomlin 2013), *Theatre of the Real* (Martin 2013), the Issue 11 of the journal *Performance Paradigm* in 2015, dedicated to “Staging Real People” (edited by Meg Mumford and Ulrike Garde)<sup>163</sup>, *Shattering Hamlet’s Mirror: Theatre and Reality* (Carlson 2016), by Marvin Carlson, Carl Lavery’s articles and editing in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd* (Lavery and Finburgh 2015) and the issue of *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*<sup>164</sup>, or *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real* (Schulze 2017). In these writings, the approach to staging the real touches on a diversity of aspects, but two views appear to be prominent: on the one hand, the staging of the real implies an ecological view of theatre, considering relations that are established between the performative work and the “real” environment(s) in which it occurs; on the other hand, the staging of the real elicits ethical and political questions concerning, for example, the staging of real documents, practices or people, or by questioning the concrete “reality” of how theatre works are devised.

From here, I propose that performances of theatre without actors can be seen to appropriate, inhabit or cooperate with existing modes of perceiving and participating in reality. Even if the interest of staging the real appears to reside in an immediate access to reality, within performances without actors, there appears to be a reinforcement of medial strategies. In this sense, an “undecidability” becomes part of devising “perceptibility,” as these medial strategies aim at simultaneously guiding the spectatorial experiencing of the real, while simultaneously attempting to suggest a sense of (unmediated) immediacy<sup>165</sup>. In this way, performances without actors become a theatrical practice that rehearses modes of circulating between realms, rather than inhabiting either “‘real’ contiguity” or “‘staged’ construct”.

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The Guardian newspaper: “Immersive Theatre”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/immersive-theatre>

<sup>163</sup> Meg Mumford and Ulrike Garde (eds.), *Performance Paradigm*, Vol. 11 (2015)

<sup>164</sup> Carl Lavery (ed.), *Green Letters – Studies in Ecocriticism*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2016)

<sup>165</sup> In this regard, “immersiveness” becomes an important strategy to absorb the agency of audiences within environments of play, as seen in Chapter 1 about participatory performances with humans, such as Verhoeven’s *The Big Movement*, Rimini Protokoll’s *Sonde Hannover* or Ciríaco and Sonnberger’s *Here Whist We Walk*, or in performances with non-humans, such as in Verdonck’s cycle *Actor #1*, Marleau’s *Les Aveugles* or Goebbels’ *Stifters Dinge*.

### **Conclusion: Moving Theatre Beyond a Binary Account of Co-Presence**

In this chapter, I presented three kinds of discourses put forward in the context of 1990's theatre and performance studies, pointing to their relevance in framing contemporary theatre without actors. My argument is that these discourses evidence important changes in thinking about theatre during the 1990's, and that there are specific aspects of these changes that relate to the proliferation of pieces without actors in the following decade. The specific aspects of those changes that I aimed to highlight concern the possibility of staging the spectatorial gaze and of staging theatre with non-humans.

When looking from today's perspective at these 1990's theoretical shifts, it becomes possible to see that these particular discourses move in a direction different from — if not entirely opposed to — that proposed by another, contemporaneous set of discourses, which posit the ephemerality of the performative act as the essential quality of theatre and performance. As was shown in this chapter, Phelan and Fisher-Lichte take the relation between ephemerality and human presence for granted. According to these authors, during a performative act, the transience of present time is bound to the presence of human bodies. Such an assumption implies that it is not only ephemerality that is an essential aspect of theatre and performance, but also the co-presencing of a community of human actors and spectators. Evidently, performances without actors disrupt this account of co-presence and challenge the centrality of co-presence to define theatre and performance. These kinds of performances relate, instead, to theories addressing the possibility of understanding the staging of the spectatorial gaze and/or the staging non-humans as forms of theatre.

These two possibilities — the possibilities of staging the gaze and of staging non-humans — inform the construction of a theoretical basis for theatre without actors. Each of the three kinds of 1990's discourses mentioned in this chapter rethink the possibilities of staging non-humans and the spectatorial gaze. Although, by themselves, each of these two focal points do not necessarily result in the absenting of actors — they can also be applied, for example, to dramatic plays with actors — they can be seen to point towards the strategies employed by contemporary performance without actors, such as those presented in “Chapter 1”. These staging strategies can also be seen to engage with forms of staging the spectatorial gaze and non-humans. In this regard, it was proposed that the aims, means and reach of contemporary performances of theatre without actors are better understood when they are seen in the context of the three kinds of expanded theatre mentioned in

this chapter<sup>166</sup>, particularly when considering intersections between such practices, ways of approaching the staging of the spectatorial gaze, and of staging non-humans. Below, I detail how these connections can be made clearer.

In the first part of the second section of this chapter, I showed how the views of Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander counter the concept of given and unmediated presence. Their contributions identify the need to rethink presence and liveness in relation to the performativity of technology and media, opening the possibility of thinking about theatre beyond co-presence, at least when understood exclusively as the physical co-existence and temporal simultaneity of human actors and spectators. By challenging such a binary account of co-presence, these discourses open possibilities for thinking conceptually about pieces in which machines are the only present things performing on stage, such as in Goebbels's *Stifters Dinge*, Mroué and Saneh's *33 rpm and a Few Seconds*, and Dorsen's *Hello Hi There*. These discourses relate especially closely to Verdonck's *M, a Reflection*, inasmuch as the element of undecidability with regards to which of the two performers was the human and which was a video projection problematises the perception of liveness. Through such a theoretical lens, one can also consider the strategy of staging "Doubles", illustrated by pieces such as Marleau's cycle *Fantasmagories Technologiques*, as well as Verdonck's *Huminid* and *Them*. In these pieces, the reality of the physical presence of video projections and the illusion of physical human presence that they manifest create an ambiguous zone between what is living and what is technological but nevertheless do not interrupt the sense of the liveness pertaining, in these works, to both living and technological beings. The writings of Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander contribute towards an understanding that the absence of actors does not necessarily exclude the perceiving of presence and liveness, and that intermedial performances without actors create a kind of co-presence wherein relations between audiences and actants is to a large extent constituted by technological mediation.

In the second part, I discussed texts by Féral, Fischer-Lichte and Rozik that are explicit about the possible absence of the actor and the acting of non-humans. As I have shown, they propose that theatre could be identified outside of the theatrical context, given the reconstitution of the spectatorial gaze and of what is understood

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<sup>166</sup> Although most artists referred to in "Chapter 1" don't evidence their work in relation to these discourses of the 1990's, there are two exceptions, Goebbels and Dorsen who, in the above-mentioned articles, respectively, refer Fuchs' account of a "theatre of absence", and Phelan's and Brook's accounts of presence and co-presence as defining aspects of theatre and performance.

by “acting”. Their writings expand theatricality into the everyday, beyond the theatre space and beyond actors.

Performances mentioned in the first chapter, using strategies such as “aural scores”, “readership” and “non-actors”, materialise views similar to those expressed by the above-mentioned authors when it comes to locating the sense of theatricality in the spectatorial gaze. For example, Theater Ligna’s *Radio Ballets* invade and pervade outdoor spaces such as public squares and streets with choreographies by volunteers that follow instructions given through the radio. In a different key, Rotozaza’s *Etiquette* or Hampton and Etchell’s *The Quiet Volume* engage with audiences one spectator at a time, in intimate and quiet environments such as at a table for two in a café or in a public library. Another strategy of staging the everyday is found in pieces which stage “non-actors”, such as Rimini Protokoll’s *Chácara Paraíso*, Gerardo Naumann’s *Factory* or Dominic Huber’s *House*, wherein the spectatorial gaze of the audience is adapted to a nontheatrical environment. In this way, the theories that Féral, Fischer-Lichte and Rozik put forward in the 1990’s provide a context within which it becomes tenable to consider the possibility of engendering perceptions of theatricality in relation to performances without actors. Actually, their accounts suggest that theatrical co-presence should be conceptualised not as a binary figure, instantiated between humans in theatrical spaces, but rather as a more complex, environmental or ecological relation wherein diverse agents can perform acting, following and immersing the spectatorial gaze.

The third part elaborated on this view by considering how theatrical experiences are brought about in several specific non-theatrical environments. This part followed on from the ecological theatre conceptualised by Chaudhuri and Fuchs, as well as from Lehmann’s reflections about staging the real. What is relevant about these discourses with regards to theatre without actors is that such environmental implicatedness allows for modes of staging the real and activating perceptions of real life without recourse to the presence and agency of actors. This theoretical precision opens a way to thinking about theatrical co-presence as an ecological situation that involves humans and non-humans in a network of relations, rather than in terms of the binary relation between humans implied by a narrower account of co-presence. The views of Chaudhuri, Fuchs and Lehmann concerning theatre as an environment of humans and non-humans can be seen to be articulated by radical strategies for staging the real such as those at play in Schipper’s staging of animals in *Going to the Dogs* or Verdonck’s staging of natural phenomena in *Mass, Shell and Box*: these works experiment with staging non-humans, in these cases in a traditional

theatrical environment. Considering nontheatrical spaces, these theoretical writings on “landscape” and “perceptibility” also contribute to a reflection on strategies of staging “sightseeing” which take advantage of obviously staged viewpoints, such as in Verhoeven’s *The Big Movement*, Rimini Protokoll’s *Sonde Hannover* or Ciriaco and Sonnberger’s *Here Whilst We Walk*. In these works, the rethinking of co-presence beyond the binary account is particularly evident, as exchanges are staged between humans, non-humans and their common surroundings. The arguments put forth by Chaudhuri, Fuchs and Lehmann suggest how an environmental approach to theatre, in which the theatrical event is seen as a networked relation between human and non-human actants and audiences, can be relevant for understanding performance in the absence of actors. Moreover, their discourses allow an understanding of “the absence of actors” that is itself expanded: rather than only referring to the physical absence of humans, the examination of pieces without actors but with humans — as in pieces with non-actors or involving audience participation — invite a rethinking of acting and agency in an expanded ecology of theatre.

The three modifications highlighted in this chapter mark an expansion in the understanding of theatre insofar as they enable thinking the conditions of presence beyond physical human presence, and acting as a practice extending beyond the professional expertise of actors. Considering the affiliation between these specific 1990’s discourses and contemporary theatrical strategies without actors, it follows that theatre without actors resists essentialist views of the discipline of theatre — particularly those which posit the human actor as fundamental — as well as resists the claim that theatre can deliver unmediated reality. In this sense, theatre without actors resists theatre, as well as nature. It is from this perspective that I propose looking at contemporary practices of performing without human performers or without professional actors as practices which rehearse new modes of being co-present in theatre, overcoming binary accounts and essentialist claims. This is the proposition which, as will be seen in the following — closing — section, has been the main argumentative line of this dissertation.



## Conclusion

### — Acting Beyond Theatre

The aim of this dissertation has been to introduce, describe and reflect about the phenomenon of contemporary theatre without actors. My departure point was the multiplicity of strategies of staging applied in a number of stage works presented in the last fifteen years in which there were no professional actors or human performers. As I evidenced, the absencing of the actor is not an end in itself in these works, but results from an interest in staging and perceiving aspects of the real. These aspects in particular concern exchanges in public spaces and with nature, such as in cases of staging natural phenomena or technology; unrehearsed audiences or public spaces; or inexperienced performers or animals. I have also shown that the absencing of the actor is not an oddity of contemporary theatre but is in line with earlier developments in theatre history: on the one hand, the idea was explicitly discussed by European theatre makers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while on the other hand, a number of discussions in the field of theatre and performance studies in the 1990's can be seen today as theoretical approaches that precede the emergence of theatre without actors in the early 2000's. In this closing text, I start by revising the specific conclusions of each of the previous chapters to then draw connections between them. In considering these connections, I approach how the phenomenon of theatre without actors intersects with the field of philosophy, highlighting how theatre without actors can be seen to rehearse specific posthuman and object-oriented philosophical views.

#### **Staging the Real Beyond Actors: Reviewing Arguments**

In the first chapter, I introduced a multiplicity of strategies at play in contemporary theatre in which there are no actors, while showing that it is possible to acknowledge a degree of consistency within these diverse strategies. In the second chapter, I demonstrated that the idea of absencing the actor is not a novelty of contemporary theatre but an issue which was put forward and discussed earlier, and which, in fact, yielded relevant theoretical contributions to theatre history. Finally, in the third

chapter, I argued that there are specific discourses from 1990's theatre and performance studies which are relevant to understanding contemporary theatre without actors, particularly concerning staging the spectatorial gaze and non-humans. In the following, I outline the core ideas of each chapter and how they contribute to drawing the overarching conclusions about theatre without actors which characterise this dissertation.

In the first chapter, I introduced seven strategies that I have found applied in contemporary performances without professional or human performers. These strategies were illustrated with examples of performances. I grouped the strategies according to their common aims and means, resulting in the withdrawal or substitution of performers in each example. The strategies were further categorized in three sections. The first section, entitled "Artificial Beings", included two strategies — "Doubles" and "Autonomous Machines" — that addressed the staging of technology insofar as it enables the recasting of human presence or the substitution of human agency through the use of technological apparatuses; the second section, entitled "Environments of Play", included two strategies — "Aural Scores" and "Readership" — that addressed forms of audience participation devised to function autonomously, guided by aural and written scores; and the third section, entitled "Making Appear the Apparent", included three strategies — "Staging Non-Actors", "Staging Natural Phenomena" and "Staging Sightseeing" — that addressed forms of staging the real such as in performances enacted by non-actors, animals, natural phenomena, and in cases in which what is staged is primarily the spectatorial gaze over its surroundings.

On closer inspection, these strategies of absencing performers were framed as forms of absencing particular aspects of theatre actors: absencing their physical presence, or dismissing their professional training, or thematising their mediating role (for instance, between real and fictional realms, or between the spaces of the audience and of stage). The first conclusion drawn from assembling these strategies is that the absencing of the performer in the contemporary field of performing arts is not a homogeneous practice but a phenomenon inflected by a multiplicity of strategies and of outcomes. Although the tendency to absent the actor in contemporary theatre is consistent, continuous, informed and networked — rather than random and sporadic — it does not define a homogeneous field of theatrical practices, or exemplify an explicit artistic claim made universally by choreographers, theatre- and performance-makers engaging with these strategies. One of the main reasons for this is that the absencing of performers is rarely an aim in itself, but rather the

consequence of artistic choices mobilized by diverse kinds of interests: in exploring technological possibilities, in devising forms of audience participation, in staging animals or non-actors, or in experimenting with mediated modes of perceiving. By withdrawing the actor, theatre makers explore other forms of presence beyond the human and other forms of acting beyond the professional practice of the actor. The withdrawal of the actor represents not only a change in ways of perceiving ‘who’ or ‘what’ is present and acting but also in ways of perceiving theatrical acting as encompassing a variety of different modes of agency. This multiplicity of practices, strategies, and outcomes do however bear common traits, such as an interest in the staging of non-humans and the spectatorial gaze. Although a variety of strategies were observed, and different performative approaches related to each, the staging of reality emerged as an aspect transversal to many of the strategies employed by contemporary theatre without actors. Even in those cases in which an interest in the staging of reality is perhaps not directly apparent — such as in works utilizing the strategy of staging “doubles”, or the pieces by Mroué and Saneh, and by Dorsen — a certain relation to the staging of the real can be observed, brought to the fore by the material presence of the scenographic installation and the medial setting which, in a sense, can be seen as a particular iteration of a more general interest in staging the literal reality of things rather than elaborating upon them figuratively or metaphorically.

In the second chapter, I presented references to absenting the actor in performances and discourses from between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. With this chapter, I aimed to demonstrate that the possibility of absenting the actor is not a novelty of contemporary theatre but rather that it has a history in the development of modern Western theatre. The chapter is structured in two sections. In the first, I briefly introduced a number of performances and shows, presented between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which were performed without physically present actors or professional performers. As in the first chapter, I underlined the strategies for absenting the actor that were utilised, and highlighted which ones appeared to have been themselves the main aim of the performance. These works staged mechanical bodies, or mechanical phenomena, or natural phenomena: the examples are very diverse, and include presentations of automata and demonstrations of phenomena such as electricity or hysteria, as well as spectacles of visual effects such as the phantasmagoria, the pepper’s ghost, or the diorama. The examples showed how strategies of staging that side-lined, substituted or dispensed entirely with actors have been already experimented with well before the present day.

Following this brief presentation, I continued to present early references about

absenting the actor in a section dedicated to introducing a number of essays by Kleist, Lamb, Maeterlinck, Craig, Prampolini, Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy. These essays were written between the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by these theatre makers, and they explicitly address the possibility of withdrawing the actor from stage, even going so far as to put forward concrete strategies for staging without actors. The essays cover an extensive period of time and it is possible to see how, in some cases, essays build on historically prior ones. For example, it is possible to trace a line of influence between the essays of Lamb, Maeterlinck, Craig and Prampolini — as indicated by the authors themselves — and notice how the aims and means concerning the urge to absent the actor change over time. The essays were introduced and analysed together in three parts, the first part concerning the sense in which each author characterised the actor's inadequacy to their theatrical project, followed in the second part by an account of how they each envisioned anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic surrogates for actors, and concluding, in the third part, with a description of how they each imagined the absenting of the actor as a logical step towards affirming a definition of theatre which excluded human acting. These discourses highlight the fact that the absenting of the actor in this period was not seen as an aim in itself — as shown was also the case with contemporary theatre without actors — but rather came as a consequence of defining theatre as an artificial art form that could dispense with the presence of humans. In the views of Maeterlinck, Craig or Prampolini, the absenting of the actor serves to assert the disciplinary autonomy of theatre as an artistic genre.

Although similarities can be observed between today's approaches to absenting the actor and those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries — in their use of technology, their criticism of physical presence, and their interest in staging materiality — they differ on this point: while the absence of the actor was deemed necessary by authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in consequence of a view of theatre which posited it as an autonomous artistic discipline, ideally independent from human interference, contemporary theatre makers have, on the contrary, not stated that the absence of the actor in their pieces responds to a claim about the definition of theatre. Contemporary theatre without actors takes an approach which reveals a greater interest in exploring new possibilities opened up by an expanded understanding of what theatre can be — an interest in rethinking definitions of theatre — rather than in intervening to resist existing definitions and aiming to establish a singular new one. As follows in the third chapter, contemporary practices of absenting the actor can be seen, instead, in line with 1990's discourses that expand understandings of

theatre concerning, for example, the relation of co-presence between stage and audiences, the constitution of the spectatorial gaze, and of the staging of non-humans.

I started the third chapter by introducing the views of Phelan and Fischer-Lichte, who defend the ephemeral character of the performative act as that which defines theatre and performance. According to them, ephemerality has a quality of transience which cancels the possibility that performances might be mediated and commodified. This transient ephemerality is also, for them, a way of understanding co-presence. Particularly for Fischer-Lichte, the “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” is seen as an “underlying factor” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 32) in defining performance and theatre alike. Given that the absenting of actors disrupts the notion that co-presence is a relation held exclusively between humans, and that it is an unmediated relation, I looked for discourses from the 1990’s that countered this binary account of co-presence. In the second part of the chapter, I presented three kinds of discourses which expand ways of thinking about theatre beyond essentialist approaches to co-presence, and which, in that sense, point to the possibility of thinking theatre without actors. With the first set of discourses, I introduced views by Picon-Vallin, Jones and Auslander which reflect on the way technology effects the acting of actors and how this acting is perceived. They do not consider the physical presence of actors to be defined by unmediated ephemerality; rather, by their account, the perception of liveness is constitutively marked by mediations. Accordingly, rather than seeing performances as events only happening in a continuous present tense, and as instances definitively preceding their documentation, these authors promote the view that presence and liveness are always already mediated. In this way, they indicate that theatrical agency is not exclusively attributable to actors but determined by a co-presence that involves the agency of humans and (non-human) technology in an environment marked by mediated relations.

After that, I looked at texts by Féral, Fischer-Lichte and Rozik discussing the possibility of thinking theatricality beyond the theatrical space, such as, for example, in real-life settings. In particular, I pointed at two perspectives expressed in their texts that I consider relevant to the study of theatre without actors. The first perspective pertains to the re-assertion, contrary to the evidence given in previous sections, that actors and especially actor-audience relations of co-presence are fundamental to defining theatre, also outside of theatre. The second perspective refers to interchanges between theatre and reality through which “acting” can be seen in an expanded way: abstracted from the presence of human actors, an interdisciplinary theatricality comes to be understood as anchored in the spectator’s gaze and

may depend upon the agency of non-humans, expanding theatre beyond theatrical spaces and dramatic texts and into forms of speculative and perceptive experimentation. In the same way that theatricality becomes tenable beyond theatre, acting becomes likewise imaginable beyond actors.

Finally, I discussed texts by Chaudhuri, Fuchs and Lehmann which consider notions of ecological theatre, landscape and perceptibility. I showed how their views reveal an approach to theatre that hinges on its relation to non-theatrical realities. In this regard, they further the previous approach to theatricality. However, beyond simply addressing the constitution of the real by the spectatorial gaze, these authors reflect on the very staging of the real, that is, on how aspects of real life — such as objects, animals or landscapes, but also non-professional human performers, such as spectators or non-actors — are staged in the theatre. Highlighting a deep implicatedness with the real, forms of ecological theatre draw attention to the undecidability of ‘theatrical’ or ‘non-theatrical’, implying as a consequence the problematisation of perceptibility in the theatre.

These three sets of discourses, evidencing expanded views about theatre in the 1990’s, prefigure forms of theatre in the 2000’s which absent actors, insofar as the strategies presented in the first chapter were also characterised by an interest in expanding ways of staging the spectatorial gaze and in the staging of non-humans. The idea that the absenting of the actor relates to and extends the views expressed in the 1990’s is supported by the fact that theatre makers do not discuss the absenting of the actor as a primary interest; this latter is rather focused squarely on an expansion into new forms of acting by new acting subjects, such as spectators, non-actors, animals, objects, machinery, or natural phenomena. In formal terms, performances have recourse to a multiplicity of strategies that — in line with approaches to intermediality, theatricality and ecology — extend beyond dualist accounts of co-presence. Such strategies include the use of audience participation, the casting of non-actors, the guidance of the spectatorial gaze, the staging of natural phenomena, and technological approaches, which incorporate apparatuses varying between highly complex computerised devices and simple, individual gadgets.

In this way, it is possible to characterize the contemporary iteration of theatre without actors as a multiplicity of theatre practices which primarily aim to stage the spectatorial gaze, focusing it on non-professional performers and non-humans. Such practices speak to an overarching interest in the staging of the real. Heterogeneous, but also consistent and continuous, contemporary theatre without actors is created by performing arts professionals, such as theatre directors or set designers. To some

artists, the absenting of the actor represents only an isolated experience while, for others, it stands out as a recurring tendency in their body of work — such as in the cases of Verdonck, Hampton, Verhoeven, Rimini Protokoll or Theater Ligna. Artists that develop theatre without actors sometimes notably work together, such as in the case of the cluster of artists with similar formal strategies working as “Ciudades Paralelas”. An interest in diverse forms of staging the real bias these performances towards the intermedial and interdisciplinary, and the theatre makers that create them tend to be influenced by non-theatrical fields such as choreography or visual arts, as well as by philosophy, politics and science. Furthermore, contemporary practices of theatre without actors are not aimed at supporting an essentialist claim about the definition of theatre but can be, instead, instrumental to rethinking fundamental assumptions about theatre as an artistic discipline. Considering this, I develop, in the following, an approach to theatre without actors that reaches beyond the realms of theatre and performance, asking: how do aspects of theatre without actors materialize and rehearse specific posthumanist philosophies?

### **Acting Beyond Theatre: Intersections of Theatre Without Actors and Posthumanist Philosophy**

In this section, I show how forms of theatre without actors can be seen to rehearse concepts theorised by Jacques Derrida, as well as by Bruno Latour and Karen Barad.<sup>167</sup> My intention is to show how they can be understood as modes of experimentation with the aim of materialising the situations and events which those concepts imply, even if only tentatively. I take recourse to the term “rehearsal” because, on the one hand, I want to refer to the sense in which works without actors can be seen as “try-outs” wherein new modes of being co-present are experimented with; on the other hand, I also wish to note that, although pieces without actors stage modes of perceiving and participating in reality, they are developed in the controlled environment of

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<sup>167</sup> By looking specifically at aspects of the work of Latour and of Barad I am trying to engage with a larger set of discourses that are relevant to think about contemporary performances without performers, namely, the posthuman and object-oriented theories developed in the last decade. The ground-breaking work of theorists such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad, among others, challenge ontological dualisms and normative logics of performativity, reflecting on the affiliation between human acting and the agency of non-humans such as machines, animals or natural phenomena.

theatrical practice. In consideration of this point, I unravel the sense in which theatre without actors “rehearses” the non-dualistic modes of co-presence also explored in the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, particularly in his critique of the “metaphysics of presence”, as well as with regards to his notion of “hauntology”. Then, looking at the development of post-humanist discourses rethinking relations between humans, matter and media, I refer to French philosopher Bruno Latour and his appropriation of the notion of actor in the his “Actor-Network Theory”, as well as to North-American philosopher Karen Barad’s article “Posthumanist Performativity” (Barad 2003) and the theories put forth therein concerning the performance of agency as an impeller of knowledge formation. With this analysis, my aim is to show how it is possible to draw relations between contemporary theatre without actors and specific philosophical concepts through an expanded notion of co-presence.

### **Metaphysics of Presence and Hauntology**

In his book *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1998), Derrida observes a specific case that, in his account, is marked by an ideology of presence: the assumption that oral speech precedes writing. His deconstruction of this assumption inspired discourses in theatre and performance studies which aimed to resist notions of the centrality of presence to theatre and performance. An example can be found in the article “Presence and the Revenge of Writing” (Fuchs 1985) by Fuchs, who argues how, at the time, post-modern philosophy was challenging ideas about the physical presence of performers and their encounter with the audience. Fuchs asks to what extent a specific notion of presence has played a role in the assumptions made about the performing body, and about the relationship between performers and audience. Problematizing the dominance of an ideology of presence in discourses about theatre and performance, Fuchs refers to Derrida.

One might say that we have been witnessing in contemporary theatre, and especially in performance, a representation of the failure of the theatrical enterprise of spontaneous speech with its logocentric claims to origination, authority, authenticity - in short, Presence. This motion amounts to a virtual deconstruction of the defining hierarchy that has sustained theatre since the Renaissance. [...] Derrida raises the large question whether philosophy can

continue to be philosophy without the support of logocentric metaphysics. Have we arrived at such a question in theatre? (Fuchs 1985, 172)

When Fuchs mentions Derrida's question about a logocentric<sup>168</sup> metaphysics, she is referring to Derrida's critique of the ideology of presence in Western metaphysics that, in turn, followed an idea from German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Drawing on Heidegger's account of the dominance of a "metaphysics of presence" in the history of Western philosophy, Derrida aimed to deconstruct metaphysical assumptions embedded in the production of discourse. In the book *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2010), originally published in 1927, Heidegger reflects about the connection between the notions of "being" and "duration". In his argument, Heidegger points out that the notion of presence is deeply rooted in Western philosophy, especially in the discourses of ontology and metaphysics. According to Heidegger, the Western conceptualization of time constitutes the undisputed ground of metaphysical thought, particularly in its privileging of the present moment over past and future<sup>169</sup>. This privileging of the present has implied a definition of presence as "being in time", but also of being as "being present", establishing that "to be" is to be "present", to embody temporal presence. Heidegger refers to the association of the notions of "presence" and of "being" as the "metaphysics of presence": "From the dawn of Western-European thinking until today, Being signifies the same as presencing. Out of presencing, presence speaks of the present. [...] Being is determined as presence through time". (Heidegger cited by White 1996, 147-8)<sup>170</sup>

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168 Although the expression "logocentrism" has come to be associated mainly with Derrida's use, it has not been formulated by him but existed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On this regard, and on Derrida's particular reading of the term, see for example: "Logocentrism", *The Chicago School of Media Theory*. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/logocentrism/>

169 A good example of such privileging can be seen in Walter Benjamin's notion of aura in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 2015), written in 1935. In this essay, Benjamin defined aura as: on one hand, the "authenticity" of a thing, and on other hand, the essence of all that is "transmittable". The authenticity of a thing was based on its duration and the essence of transmission was based on historical testimony. The decomposition of aura through the use of mechanical reproduction technologies would supposedly happen because reproduction disturbs the temporality both of duration and of testimony. Drawing an analogy to performance, material repetition would, in Benjamin's conceptualization, disturb the temporality both of performance and of the documentation of performance. Singularity, in his view, is disturbed by similarity.

170 Scholar Carol White introduces Heidegger's account of the relation between being and time: "At least since the days of Plato and Aristotle, we have taken 'to be' as signifying 'to endure through

A “metaphysics of presence” is at work in Brook and Grotowski’s minimal definitions of theatre, as well as in the arguments of Fischer-Lichte and Phelan, wherein co-presence is put forward as an ontological fundament of theatre and performance. Differently, as I have shown, performances without actors or human performers discredit the apparent immediacy of the co-presence constituted by actors and spectators and, in doing so, diffuse the dualism embedded therein. Following this logic, I propose that pieces of theatre without actors — and, generally, performances without humans — can be seen as practices which rehearse the disruption of a “metaphysics of presence” in its role as a central principle in theatre and performance studies. For example, in performances taking recourse to “aural scores” or “sightseeing”, audiences are present in two realms simultaneously — the theatrical and the non-theatrical — and in their perception, the line between what is staged and what is unrehearsed is ambiguous. Given that participants are simultaneously spectators but also acting subjects, their presence in these performances is hybrid, a condition complemented and augmented in its ambiguous multiplicity by layered aural environments, intersecting pre-recorded soundtracks with real-time sounds. Similarly, in performances such as those taking advantage of “doubles” as a theatrical strategy, the illusion of presence is fabricated by technology, and it is impossible to definitively differentiate between what is physically and digitally present. In this case, actors are perceived as simultaneously being and not-being on stage, which complicates the perception of a homogenous real-time presence. Furthermore, the simultaneity of being and not-being relates to another notion put forward by Derrida: that of “hauntology”.

The term “hauntology” was put forward by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida 1993). In this book, Derrida reflects about how Marx and communist ideology persisted in haunting Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. To address that persistence, Derrida recalls Marx and Engels’s own opening words in the “Manifesto

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time.’ Something is not taken to be ‘really’ real unless it is at some moment of time, that is, unless it has presence at some present. [...] By pointing out that Western culture has taken Being as presencing, Heidegger suggests that our way of understanding the Being of what-is, that is, for example, the Being of nature, history, language, and ourselves, is only one possible way of understanding Being and could be different. Thus, presencing is not simply the way things reveal themselves in any human being’s present but only how they reveal themselves to Western Dasein. We are so immersed in our own understanding of Being that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a radically different way of understanding things.” (White 1996, 147-8)

of the Communist Party” (Marx and Engels 2012), first published in 1848: “A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism” (Marx, Engels 2012, 33) Derrida’s interest in this “spectre” and, generally, in spectrality as a “conceptual metaphor”<sup>171</sup>, can be further understood through his reference to the opening scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1990), first published in 1603, wherein the main character is visited by the ghost of his father. Hamlet claims that “the time is out of joint” (Shakespeare 1990, 45) and this disjunction is the deconstructive quality central to what Derrida terms a “hauntology”. “Hauntology” is a wordplay on the word “ontology”. Derrida employs this wordplay in order to mark the destabilization of the “metaphysics of presence” embedded in ontological dualisms, such as those opposing presence to absence. A ghost that is haunting is as much in the present as it is in the past, simultaneously present and absent. As with Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, his notion of “hauntology” served the purpose of deconstructing the “metaphysics of presence” insofar as forms which make absences perceivable entail a spectrality that denatures presence-absence dualism. As explained by Jones: “Derrida’s deconstructive strategy is to raise the spectre of nonpresence at the core of every ‘present’ moment [...] ‘presence’ only exists as a fantasy or a construct to anchor us (phantasmagorically) in the now” (Jones 2011, 19).

In this regard, it is interesting to recall how Phelan’s definition of performance associates a “metaphysics of presence” with an “ontology of disappearance” when

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171 Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), reflect on the diverse implications of thinking on “haunting” as a conceptual metaphor: “A conceptual metaphor, Mieke Bal suggests, differs from an ordinary one in evoking, through a dynamic comparative interaction, not just another thing, word or idea and its associations, but a discourse, a system of producing knowledge. Besides fulfilling an aesthetic or semantic function, then, a conceptual metaphor ‘performs theoretical work.’ The ghost’s emerging status as an analytical tool that does theory—and thereby, as Derrida notes in the above epigraph, ‘sets heads spinning’ — was signaled and delineated by the sudden preference expressed in 1990s cultural criticism for the somewhat archaic terms ‘specter’ and ‘spectrality’ over the more mundane ‘ghost’ and ‘ghostliness.’ ‘Specter’ and ‘spectrality’ not only have a more serious, scholarly ring to them, but specifically evoke an etymological link to visibility and vision, to that which is both looked at (as fascinating spectacle) and looking (in the sense of examining), suggesting their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead. In their new spectral guise, certain features of ghosts and haunting—such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession — quickly came to be employed across the humanities and social sciences to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions.” (Blanco, Peeren, 2013: 2,3)

claiming, for instance, that “performance’s only life is in the present” but also that “performance’s being becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 2005, 146). Departing from this definition, Auslander argues that recorded material also tends to disappear as it is “performed”. Accordingly, media traces accord with an “ontology of disappearance”, in the same way as the transient bodies of performance: “In a very literal, material sense, televisual reproductions, like live performances, become themselves through disappearance [...] Like live performance, electronic and photographic media can be described meaningfully as partaking of the ontology of disappearance ascribed to live performance” (Auslander 1999, 45, 51). This ontology of disappearance bears the mark of a hauntological relation between the perception of presence and physical disappearance, or between human body and technological media, which are not seen as separate entities but rather simultaneous occurrences.

Performances without performers can be seen to disjoin presence-absence dualism and, in this regard, they partake of a hauntological approach. For example, the absence of the human can be thought of as “spectral” considering that it doesn’t entirely disappear in pieces without actors but rather persists, lingering, for example, in fragments and traces such as recorded voices, photo and video recordings, or contact-based masks — as in *Les Aveugles*. An understanding of theatre without actors as a set of practices which rehearse “hauntology” allows the theorization of this idea as suited to the articulation of presence and appearing, absence and disappearing, as well as trace and spectrality. In this regard, an hauntological approach also allows the reframing of the common-sense notion of co-presence — understood as relation happening in a simultaneous time — and its expansion beyond the now. Co-presence with things which are both perceptible and somehow temporally “past” can be achieved, for instance, through the staging of non-humans such as technological documents and objects.

### **Actor-Network Theory and Posthuman Performativity**

In the following, I show how contemporary performances without performers can relate to discourses on posthumanism by engaging with two particular theories: the “actor-network theory” proposed by Latour and the notions of “onto-epistem-ology” proposed by Barad. Latour’s and Barad’s ideas exemplify modes of theorising that relate to performances without performers, and are particularly relevant to treating issues of non-human actors, perception and agency. As seen earlier in this dissertation, the assumption that theatrical acting presupposes a

homogenous acting subject whose self supports the presentation of fictional characters has been challenged by intermedial and post-dramatic performance. The word “actor” indicates the one “who acts”, and although it normally designates human performers, in performances without actors it can refer to other acting subjects such as non-professional performers and audience members, as well as animals, technology and objects.

In Latour’s “actor-network theory” — also referred to as “ANT” — the notion of the actor is taken from theatre in order to designate an acting subject within a network of relations, rather than an actor performing a representation for a spectator. Latour wishes to emphasize the sense in which this acting subject can be human or non-human, but also to highlight its movement across a network of relations. In *Reassembling the Social* (Latour 2005), Latour proposes action not to be a homogeneous and wilful event carried out by a single subject but rather to be a network: “action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled<sup>172</sup>” (Latour 2005, 44). In this setting, an actor is not someone who represents actions to others; rather, “An actor is what is made to act by many others” (Latour 2005, 46).

An “actor” in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it. [...] To use the word “actor” means that it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. [...] As soon as the play starts, [...] nothing is certain: Is this for real? Is it fake? Does the audience’s reaction count? [...] Is the character carried over? And if so, by what? [...] If we accept to unfold the metaphor, the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action, warning us that it is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair. [...] If an actor is said to be an actor-network, it is first of all to underline that it represents the major source of uncertainty about the origin of action. (Latour 2005, 46)

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172 “For the social sciences to regain their initial energy, it’s crucial not to conflate all the agencies overtaking the action into some kind of agency — ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘structure’, ‘fields’, ‘individuals’, [...] Action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event. It is for this reason that we should begin, [...] from the under-determination of action, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when ‘we’ act — and there is of course no way to decide whether this source of uncertainty resides in the analyst or in the actor.” (Latour 2005, 45)

In “actor-network theory”, the invocation of the figure of the theatrical actor seems primarily intended to indicate a subject performing actions but, for Latour, the theatrical example also demonstrates that an actor doesn’t act alone but always through triggering a network to “swarm”. In fact, an actor in a network is not properly a subject but is primarily an “actant”; that is, in Latour’s view, an agent devoid of figuration<sup>173</sup>: “if agency is one thing, its figuration is another. [...] ‘Figuration’ is one of those technical terms I need to introduce [...] because it is essential to grasp that there exist many more figures than anthropomorphic ones.” (Latour 2005, 53) The word actant is imported into “actor-network theory” from literary studies and narratology. In the literary analysis of folk tales, for example, an actant is whatever acts in any form:

Because they deal with fiction, literary theorists have been much freer in their enquiries about figuration than any social scientist, [...] in a fable, the same actant can be made to act through the agency of a magic wand, a dwarf, a thought in the fairy’s mind, or a knight killing two dozen dragons. (Latour 2005, 54)

An actant is primarily a mode or a function within a networked combination of functions acting together. Following Latour as he proceeds from actor to actant, it becomes possible to understand objects as actants in a network of relations, such as in the case of objects in a theatre piece without actors. This approach implies that relations between humans and non-humans be rethought: “ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actors<sup>174</sup>: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans.” (Latour

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<sup>173</sup> “This is exactly what the words ‘actor’ and ‘person’ mean: no one knows how many people are simultaneously at work in any given individual; conversely, no one knows how much individuality there can be in a cloud of statistical data points.” (Latour 2005, 54)

<sup>174</sup> “This, of course, does not mean that these participants ‘determine’ the action, that baskets ‘cause’ the fetching of provisions or that hammers ‘impose’ the hitting of the nail. Such a reversal in the direction of influence would be simply a way to transform objects into the causes whose effects would be transported through human action now limited to a trail of mere intermediaries. Rather, it means that there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence.” (Latour 2005, 71,72)

2005, 70-72) In sharp contradiction to a binary account of co-presence, such model of theatre implies the reconfiguration of co-presence as networked, cooperative and environmental. Figurations such as “the actor”, “the spectator”, “the writer” or “the director” become fluid and interchangeable, nomadic agencies performed by not-necessarily-human actants<sup>175</sup>.

Latour’s “actor-network theory” has a threefold relevance to the discussion of performance without performers: firstly, it pushes the notion of actor and of acting beyond anthropocentrism; secondly, it elaborates on the sense in which humans and non-humans are imbricated in networks of relations or environments of action rather than in dualist pairings; and thirdly, Latour’s writing expresses a perspective that theoretically modifies modes of co-presence, agency and enacting, and perception of surrounding realities. Latour’s “actor-network theory” provides a productive model for understanding how performances in which there are no actors devise theatrical relations that are not based on a binary idea of co-presence but which rather instantiate environments of acting. From here, yet another step bears taking, namely regarding how the modes of co-presence brought about by the absencing of the actor also engender new modes of perceiving surrounding reality. In consideration of this latter point, I now depart from Latour’s account, turning towards Barad’s view of performativity as a posthumanist process of knowledge production.

In “Posthumanist Performativity” (Barad 2003), Barad proposes appropriating the notion of performativity as methodological strategy for undermining the assumption that meanings are construed exclusively by a “representationalist” discursivity; that is, by the effort, through language, to represent knowledge of the world. According to Barad, the representationalist view assumes a gap between represented entities and “their” representations, between things known and a knowing subject. That gap, seen as the enabling condition of representation, is associated with the possibility of human knowledge, but it also implies a separation between humans and matter and, most importantly, it prevents seeing humans as matter.

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<sup>175</sup> “For this reason, once the difference between actant and agency is understood, various sentences such as ‘moved by your own interest’, ‘taken over by social imitation’, ‘victims of social structure’, ‘carried over by routine’, ‘called by God’, ‘overcome by destiny’, ‘made by your own will’, ‘held up my norms’, and ‘explained by capitalism’ become fully comparable. They are simply different ways to make actors do things (Latour 2005, 55) And although Latour acknowledges that: “To endow an agency with anonymity gives it exactly as much a figure as when it is endowed with a name, a nose, a voice, or a face.”, Latour nevertheless considers this figuration to resist anthropomorphism: “It’s just making it *ideo* - instead of *anthropomorphic*.” (Latour 2005, 53)

Overcoming such a dualism requires the consideration of matter within a post-human ecology, beyond a dualist and human-centred picture of knowledge production. Such a shift would also take place in the domain of methodology since, for Barad, discourses and representations must be understood performatively. To make such a conceptual adjustment would shift “the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality [...] to matters of practices/doings/actions” (Barad 2003, 802). Barad departs from the work of two other scholars: on the one hand, from Judith Butler’s account of gender as a cultural notion, that is, as something ‘performatively’ produced rather than naturally given<sup>176</sup>; and on the other hand, from Donna Haraway’s theoretical steps beyond the nature-culture divide in her reflections on humans relations to cyborgs and animals<sup>177</sup>. Describing how performativity became an “ubiquitous term”<sup>178</sup> (Barad 2003, 807), migrating from philosophy of language through theatre and the performing arts, Barad asserts that her particular appropriation of the term will be inflected so as to imply a posthumanist perspective on knowledge production.

A posthumanist formulation of performativity makes evident the importance of taking account of “human,” “nonhuman,” and “cyborgian” forms of agency [...] Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. [...] Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of “subjects” or “objects” (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever — it is “doing” / “being” in its intra-activity. (Barad, 2003: 826,827)

Insofar as Barad’s proposition concerns the development of performative relations in processes of knowledge production, such relations can help undo notions of ontology which frame being as “being-present”, moving being towards an “Onto-epistem-ology — the study of practices of knowing in being” (Barad 2003, 829).

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<sup>176</sup> See for example: Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

<sup>177</sup> See for example: Donna Haraway in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991)

<sup>178</sup> “Performativity has become a ubiquitous term in literary studies, theater studies, and the nascent interdisciplinary area of performance studies, prompting the question as to whether all performances are performative.” (Barad 2003, 807)

This approach frames perception and knowledge production as participatory and implicated, rather than distant and distinct from objects of knowledge. Such process allows overcoming an ontological sense of being as “being-present” through an account of agency as a “‘doing’ / ‘being’”.

In these intra-active becomings, things are not passive but participants, and agency is not dualist but environmental, networked and affective. For this reason, Barad names her point of view “agential realism”: “On an agential realist account, matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming — not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency” (Barad 2003, 822). Agential realism is, then, offered as an alternative to representationalism and the gap it implies between observer and observed, accounting instead for “all bodies — ‘human’ and ‘non-human’”(Barad 2003, 810) and for “material phenomena (i.e., relations rather than ‘things’)”(Barad 2003, 814). Rather than an inter-action between parts, Barad proposes the knowledge production as a process of “intra-action”.

Practices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because “we” are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistem-ology — the study of practices of knowing in being — is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad 2003, 829)

Through a “posthumanist performativity” that brings together both ontology and epistemology, Barad envisions the possibility of a form of knowledge production that involves and is participated in by both humans and non-humans. In her view, this runs counter to representationalist conceptualizations of knowledge production, which attempt to match things and representations. Considering the sense in which examples of theatre without actors engage with staging perceptions of the real — as shown in the first chapter — these performances can be seen as examples of a form of posthuman performance which “rehearses” onto-epistemo-logies; that is, which experiments with modes of perceiving reality and modes of co-presence which have the potential to enact a performative “intra-acting”. What is rehearsed in these performances is not simply binary co-presence, but rather modes of being

many, perceiving and acting together. Performances without performers, and pieces in which reality is staged can be seen as artistic practices which experiment with the link between being and doing, such as, for example, in participatory performances in which theatrical and non-theatrical realities are brought together.

What is at play in the absence of the human performer exceeds the theatrical and touches upon the reformulation of ideas of the real. In this regard, theatre without actors and performance without human performers can be seen as artistic practices wherein a posthuman epistemology is rehearsed and experimented with through strategies of perceptibility. These rehearsals without actors offer non-human-centred ways of perceiving the world and of being co-present. As seen in the third chapter, the absencing of actors is a strategy for experimenting with ways of revisiting the relational aspect of co-presence in an expanded way, beyond essentialist views of co-presence, which are both historical and ideological. Performances without performers produce modes of co-presence in which humans and non-humans are entangled, and which can be seen as the products of networked relations between agents within an ecosystem of subjects, means and matters. At first glance, the staging of reality may seem to be bound to either re-enact the allegory of theatre as holding a “mirror up to nature” (Shakespeare 1990, 79) or to re-enact its opposite, the allegory whereby the world is a stage<sup>179</sup>. However, considering the way in which performances without actors approach the staging of the real, and the modes of posthumanist co-presence these performances engender, it becomes possible to understand how performances staging the real beyond the agency of actors are able to articulate aspects of both allegories: they mediate ways of looking that imply separation but, at the same time, they determine an implicated co-presence.

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<sup>179</sup> “All the world’s a stage” is a line from *As You Like It*, by Shakespeare, said by Jacques in Act II, Scene VII. See, for example: William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London: Penguin Books, 1994)

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## List of Performances

*33rpm and a Few Seconds*, by Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué,  
Steirischer Herbst, Graz, September 28, 2012

*A Short Message Spectacle (an S.M.S.)*, by Tim Etchells,  
Norfolk & Norwich Festival, May 7, 2010

*Act Without Words* by Samuel Beckett, Royal Court Theatre, April 3, 1957

*All the Players (2013)* by Zhana Ivanova, Rijksacademie  
OPEN, Amsterdam, November 30, 2013

*Balthazar*, by David Weber-Krebs, Theaterschool, Amsterdam, March 31, 2011

*Box*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van  
Kerkhoven, De Warande, Turnhout, February 2, 2005

*Breath*, by Samuel Beckett, Close Theatre Club, Glasgow, October, 1969

*Call Cutta in a Box – An Intercontinental Phone Play* by Rimini  
Protokoll, Berlin, Mannheim, Zürich April 2, 2008

*Chácara Paraíso*, by Stefan Kaegi and Lola Arias (Rimini  
Protocol), Alkantara Festival, Lisbon, May 23, 2008

*Coma Profundo* by Visões Úteis, directed by Ana Vitorino, Carlos  
Costa and Pedro Carreira, Foz Velha, Porto, October 11, 2002

*Colloque de Chiens* by Miguel de Cervantes, adapted by Zaven Paré,  
design and video conception by Zaven Paré, Institut International  
de la Marionnette, Charleville Mézières, 2003

*Comédie*, by Samuel Beckett, directed by Denis  
Marleau, Lille Capitale Culturelle, 2004

*Court. In the Name of the People* by Christian Garcia. Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Landgericht, Berlin, September, 2010

*Dancer #1*, by Kris Verdonck, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, May 15, 2003

*Dancer #2*, by Kris Verdonck, Kaaitheater, Brussels, January 22, 2009

*Dancer #3*, by Kris Verdonck, Kaaistudio, Brussels, January 14, 2010

*Disabled Theatre*, by Jérôme Bel, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, May 10, 2012

*Dors Mon Petit Enfant* by Jon Fosse, directed by Denis Marleau, Lille Capitale Culturelle, 2004

*Eidophusikon* by Phillip De Louthembourg, Lisle Street, London, February 26, 1781

*Factory (La Fábrica) (L'Usine)*, by Gerardo Naumann, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am User, Mercedes Factory Marienfeld, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*Flying Boy*, by Stephan Gray, London, April 8, 1730

*Forest Walk*, by Janet Cardiff, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canadian Artist in Residence Program, 1999

*Gob Squad's Kitchen*, concept by Gob Squad, devised by Gob Squad, Prater der Volksbühne, Berlin, March 30, 2007

*Going to the Dogs*, by Wim T. Schippers, Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam, September 19, 1986

*Hello Hi There*, by Annie Dorsen, Steirischer Herbst, Graz: September 24, 2010

*Here Whilst We Walk*, Andrea Sonnberger and Gustavo Ciríaco, Alkantara Festival, Lisbon, July, 2006

*Hotel* by Lola Arias, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, IBIS Hotel, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*House / Prime Time*, by Dominic Huber, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am User, Apartment Building, Berlin-Kreuzberg, September 17, 2010

*Humid*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaistudio's, Brussels, January 14, 2010

*Lar Doce Lar* by Mónica Calle, Festival WAY, Lux, Lisbon, April, 2006

*Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, May 29, 1913

*Lagos Business Angels* by Rimini Protokoll, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, March 25, 2012

*Les Aveugles*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, directed by Denis Marleau, Avignon and Edinburgh Festivals, July and August, 2002

*Les Trois Derniers Jours de Fernando Pessoa*, by Antonio Tabucchi, adapted and directed by Denis Marleau, Salle du Paris St-Jean du Théâtre National Dijon Bourgogne, Dijon, April 24, 1997

*Library (Tour 1): The Quiet Volume* by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Universitätsbibliothek der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*M, a Reflection*, by Heiner Müller, directed by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Gent, September 25, 2012

*Mass*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaistudio's, Brussels, January 14, 2010

*Mnemopark – A Mini Train World*, by Stefan Kaegi — Rimini Protokoll, Theater Basel, July 1, 2005

*Not I*, by Samuel Beckett, directed by Alan Schneider, with the Repertory Theater, Lincoln Center, New York, November 22, 1972

*Phantasmagoria*, by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, Pavillon de l'Echiquier, Paris, January 23, 1798

*Phantasmagoria*, by Paul de Philipsthal (pseudonym Philidor), Lyceum Theatre, London, 1802

*Radio Muezzin* by Stefan Kaegi — Rimini Protokoll, Cairo and Berlin, December 2008

*Reflecting Light Games*, by Kurt Schwerdtfeger, with Joseg Hartwig and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, Lantern Festival Bauhaus, Weimar, 1922

*Roof* by Stefan Kaegi, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Festival Centre and Bar of Hebbel am Ufer Theatre, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*Rumor Clandestino*, by Fernando da Costa, directed by Gonçalo Amorim and João Brites (Teatro O Bando), Praça José Fontana, Lisbon, March 27, 2007

*Sacre du Printemps / The Rite of Spring*, by Romeo Castellucci, produced by Ruhrtriennale - International Festival of the Arts, Ruhrtriennale / Gebläsehalle Landschaftspark, Duisburg-Nord, August 15, 2014

*Sand Table*, by Magali Desbazeille and Meg Stuart, Le Fresnoy, Tourcoing, June 16, 2000

*Shell*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Kaaithheater, Brussels, February 26, 2010

*Shopping Centre* by Theater Ligna, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Arkaden am Potsdamer Platz / Alexa am Alexander Platz, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*Sister Beatrice*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Komissarzevskaja Theatre, Saint Petersburg, 1906

*Sonde Hannover*, concept by Bernd Ernst, Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Kim Haug, and Daniel Wetzel, directed by Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Kim Haug, and Daniel Wetzel (Rimini Protokoll), Kröpcke-Hochhaus, Hannover, June 8, 2002

*Station, Sometimes I Think, I Can See You* by Mariano Pensotti, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, subway station Hallesches Tor, Berlin, September, 2010

*Sync* by Emilie Gallier, Counter Punch!Punch! Festival, Amsterdam, October 13, 2012

*The Artist is Present*, by Marina Abramovi, MOMA, New York, March 14, 2010

*The Big Movement*, by Dries Verhoeven, dramaturgy by Paulien Geerlings, Theatre Festival Boulevard, s'Hertogenbosch, 2006

*The Government Inspector*, by Nikolai Gogol, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Meyerhold Theatre, Moscow, 1926

*The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* by Peter Handke, directed by Claus Peymann, Vienna Burgtheater, May 11, 1992

*The Quiet Volume*, by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, Festival Ciudades Paralelas, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, September 17, 2010

*The Turk*, by Wolfgang von Kempelen, Schönbrunn Palace, Austria, 1770

*Theatre of Ears* by Valère Novarina, directed and designed by Zaven Paré, co-directed, adapted and translated by Allen S. Weiss, 2000 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre, New York, September 13, 2000

*They*, by Kris Verdonck, dramaturgy by Marianne van Kerkhoven, Theater der Welt, Essen, July 14, 2010

*Triadic Ballet*, by Oskar Schlemmer, Stuttgart, Germany, 1922

*We Are Still Watching*, by Ivana Müller, concept and text by Ivana Müller in collaboration with Andrea Bozic, David Weber-Krebs and Jonas Rutgeerts, Theatre Frascati, Amsterdam, November, 2012



## Summary

In this dissertation, I focus on the recent phenomenon of the absence of performers in the contemporary field of the performing arts. This phenomenon is heterogeneous and manifests itself in a variety of ways, but it has been a consistent tendency of the last fifteen years. I approach this diversity by presenting seven contemporary strategies of staging that include either no professional performers or no physical human presence, illustrated each by contemporary performances, evidencing how pieces without performers are staged, and showing that the absence of the actor results greatly from an interest in staging the real. The absence of actors challenges an understanding of co-presence as a binary relation between a human actor and a human spectator, and allows for an expanded view of theatrical co-presence as a networked relation between humans and non-humans, resisting essentialist definitions of theatre — and rehearsing posthumanist philosophical views.

I show how contemporary theatre without actors can be traced back to modifications in ways of thinking about theatre in discourses on theatre and performance in the 1990's. Views on the staging of technology, the perceiving of theatricality in non-theatrical environments, and on the relations between theatre and the real, have opened new ways of thinking of the absence of actors. Furthermore, I demonstrate how ideas and forms of theatre without actors are an integral part of the history of theatre, moving from a number of early examples from the 18th century, to then look at authors, who in the 19th and early 20th centuries, have explicitly advanced the possibility of withdrawing actors from stage as a necessary step to improve the practice of theatre. Differently from these cases, I show that the absencing of the actor results today mainly from engendering new modes of co-presence, evidencing how it reconfigures assumptions about theatre and rehearses perceptions of the real.



## Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift richt ik me op het recente fenomeen van de afwezigheid van performers in de hedendaagse podiumkunsten. Dit fenomeen is heterogeen en manifesteert zich op verschillende manieren, maar het is een consistente tendens in de afgelopen vijftien jaar. Ik zal deze diversiteit benaderen door zeven hedendaagse strategieën van inscenering zonder professionele acteurs of fysieke menselijke aanwezigheid te presenteren, geïllustreerd door hedendaagse uitvoeringen waaruit blijkt hoe stukken zonder artiesten worden geënceneerd, aantonend dat de afwezigheid van de acteur in grote mate te maken heeft met een interesse in het insceneren van de realiteit. De afwezigheid van acteurs vraagt om een begrip van ‘co-presence’ als een binaire relatie tussen een menselijke acteur en een menselijke toeschouwer, en zorgt voor een breder perspectief van theateraal samenzijn als een nauwe relatie tussen mensen en niet-mensen. De afwezigheid van acteurs verzet zich tegen essentiële definities van theater — en het uitproberen van posthumanistische filosofische visies.

Ik laat zien hoe hedendaags theater zonder acteurs terug te voeren is op veranderde denkwijzen over theater in discoursen over theater en performance in de jaren negentig. Visies op de inscenering van technologie, het waarnemen van theatraliteit in niet-theatrale omgevingen, en op de relaties tussen theater en de realiteit, hebben nieuwe manieren geopend over hoe wij over de afwezigheid van acteurs denken. Verder laat ik zien hoe ideeën en vormen van theater zonder acteurs een integraal onderdeel zijn van de geschiedenis van het theater. Ik ga uit van een aantal vroege voorbeelden uit de achttiende eeuw, om vervolgens te kijken naar auteurs die in de negentiende en vroeg twintigste eeuw expliciet de mogelijkheid gecreëerd hebben om acteurs weg te laten van het podium als een noodzakelijke stap voor de verbetering van de praktijk van het theater. Anders dan in deze gevallen laat ik zien dat de afwezigheid van de acteur vandaag vooral resulteert in het voortbrengen van nieuwe vormen van ‘co-presence’, waarmee wordt aangetoond hoe het de veronderstellingen over theater veranderd en percepties van de realiteit uitprobeert.

