

Change — Now!

Power, Oppression  
and Equity in European  
Theatre and Education

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# Power, Oppression and Equity in European Theatre and Education

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# Introduction

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## Reflections on **CHANGE NOW!**

This publication is an output of *CHANGE NOW!*: an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project on democratic values, social safety and inclusion in theatre led by The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art, Warsaw, in alliance with four other European schools: the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam; Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft, Giessen; Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique, Paris; and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow. Running from 2021-2023, *CHANGE NOW!* was an educational artistic programme that brought together European theatre and performance schools with the aim to jointly create innovative practices for equity, diversity and empowerment in theatre. An important aim of the project was to engage in a common workshops, conversation and an exchange of experiences amongst all the groups of people who make up theatre school communities: students, staff and teachers. The initial idea was to create a space where we could learn from each other, despite the rigid divisions and functions imposed by the institutional system, at the same time as recognizing and naming the differences and power relations that determine our perspectives and encounters.

Students from the partner institutions were invited to participate in a 2-year workshop cycle with the possibility to develop a full scale performance in one of Warsaw's most renowned theatres. Among the ambitions of the project was the goal to support the autonomy of young artists and the development of non-violent ap-

proaches to theatre education: a system of constructive feedback, development of anti-violence and anti-discrimination policies, and supporting the strengthening of equity, diversity and inclusion practice in all the schools taking part in the project. The structure of the project was organised around four core sessions hosted by Giessen (September 2021); Amsterdam (July 2022); Paris (November 2022); and Warsaw (March 2023). Variously conceived as part-conference, part-workshop program, part-consortium meeting, these sessions comprised a range of activities including lectures and practical workshops by guest artists, student-led practice sharings, knowledge-exchange sessions on social safety between staff and joint outings to performances and other sites in the host cities. In between the four core sessions, students worked on their own projects and developed connections with each, and partners continued to meet to exchange knowledge on ongoing social safety and inclusion developments within their own academies and to collaborate on the development of joint outputs, like this volume.

Our project was conceived as practicing change and practicing hope. It was an expression of the recognition that the art institutions where we study and work need to be constantly transformed, and that this transformation can be done as a common work and shared responsibility. But the time in which we pursued it was a time of extreme tensions and what in some instances felt like a time of irreversible reckoning. We felt the energies of the great social movements – #MeToo, Black and Global Majority movements, queer, trans\* and non-binary movements,

movements working for the rights of disabled people and neurodiversity and the new feminist upsurge that was changing social consciousness in countries like Poland. It was this great wave of social mobilization that pushed the core project team to action. But the moment the project was launched, the pandemic broke out, uprooting ordinary life, social contacts, mobility, and hitting the arts with particular force, especially theatre and performing arts, as based on live embodied encounters. The pandemic brutally exposed social inequalities and the precarious condition of many bodies – particularly racialized bodies, the disabled and economically excluded. Gestures of solidarity and care networks showed that there is always room for action, but at the same time death statistics ruthlessly revealed inequalities in the distribution of social security. While we were trying to analyze the whiteness and ableism of our institutions and thinking about how to make them more accessible to all bodies, boats full of people were still sinking in the Mediterranean, refugees froze to death in Polish forests, and detention centres, where people placed in limbo are denied the status of possessing human rights, continued to grow on the borders of the European Union. In the second year of the project, war broke out in Ukraine, confronting us with naked imperial violence and necropolitics.

Under such circumstances, a sense of agency and a capacity to transform the field of art and its institutions can be easily lost. All the more important then, we found, to holding on to some sense of “hope in the dark”. In this, we followed the advice of Rebecca Solnit not to fo-

cus only on the big stage of events because this can be the shortest way to helplessness and despair. Rather, we need to get involved even more strongly where a lot depends on us and where we can change something, regaining our agency. In holding onto hope, which is part of holding change, the concept of fractal responsibility, which we took from adrienne maree brown was also helpful: „We are seeding the future, including our next systems of justice – she says – with every action we take; the fractal nature of our sacred design teaches us that our smallest choices today will become our next norms” (brown 2021, 5). We have consciously decided that we believe that in our imperfect world nothing is ever a foregone conclusion, and that what we do or don’t do is always deposited somewhere and sooner or later has an effect, affecting what we thought was beyond our reach.

We quickly learned that holding the change and sharing it with others always means persisting in an uneasy dialogue, getting lost and finding each other. *CHANGE NOW!* faced many challenges over the course of the project. Because of the pandemic the kick-off events and the first session hosted by Giessen all needed to be conducted online. For a project premised on staff and student mobility and hoping to foster collaboration between students and staff (many of whom did not know each other before the project began), this had a huge impact. At the same time, perhaps as partners we might all now agree that we were somewhat naive in our starting assumptions about how trans-institutional solidarities could be nurtured between the schools and under-esti-

mated the extent of the cultural differences between our respective contexts. The project started with a lot of hope and ambition about what partners with a shared commitment to social safety and equity, diversity and inclusion in theatre and theatre education could achieve together. But we soon located the difficulty in finding exactly what it was that we had in common and bumped up against the differences between how values like ‘safety’ and ‘inclusion’ were understood and enacted in our varying situations. It is one thing to *say* that “we” are all committed to inclusion – for example – but quite another thing to understand *what that actually means* in practice.

Questions around language were, of course, also very important to this struggle to locate common ground and particularly in a context where language plays a key role in shaping and re-shaping the very power dynamics that the project sought to address. Whilst *CHANGE NOW!* was officially conducted in English, for example, it was clearly important to notice the differences between what words do (to bodies, how they perform, what they produce) in different linguistic context and as part of how inclusion and exclusion are enacted. As chapters in this book discuss, the vocabulary of inclusion and exclusion, power and identities have different specific – and often untranslatable – histories in English, Polish, Dutch, French, and German (as well as in Spanish and Portuguese, as among the mother tongues of the students). In her important contribution to the Paris session, for instance, film director Mame-Fatou Niang noted how the language to discuss Blackness is not even there in French. Niang – as

a Black thinker from France – discovered Black Studies by way of the US. In her talk, she noted how many of the people who object to the importation of Critical Race studies to France do so on the grounds that it is a fad that forces a US frame of analysis onto the French context. But, for Niang, “Black Studies arguably revealed something to us about France” (Niang 2022). Indeed, she recalls how it was not until she studied in the US, that she was introduced to the work of foundational Black and postcolonial thinkers in France such as Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant.

Questions around the language of gender inclusion and pronoun usage also came to the fore during the project and revealed markedly different degrees of experience and different frameworks of reference for the role of language in shaping senses of belonging trans\* and non-binary people. Learning to respect the pronouns of participants, for instance, was a familiar and habitual practice for some and a new and challenging experience for others. In this regard, as project partners, we profoundly under-estimated the potential complexity of facilitating a more safe environment for participants in this trans-national context. Not enough time and care was given to enable us all – staff and students – to get to know each other, to attend to the differences and inequalities of our positionalities and to learn about the specificity of the local artistic, educational and political contexts that we were situated within. Despite good intentions on all sides, harm was done within the project itself on a number of occasions that many of us are still processing and healing from.

The premise of building transversal relations between project participants proved similarly difficult to implement. Our system-imposed roles further complicated by cultural differences and different power dynamics hindered communication and the learning process, which we assumed could flow in all directions. Default settings of the system often prevailed over the open possibility of co-creating a space of shared variables. We dreamed of a common laboratory where we would be able to try out our practices, learn from each other and experiment together, but we underestimated how much deep work it takes to design such a space – how much we need to explain to each other, how much to negotiate and name. Crossing old structures requires creating new ones, on different terms and together, and this in turn requires work on a common vocabulary and deepened awareness and mindfulness as well as the ocean of time. The intense sensation of insecurity that sometimes affected all project participants – students, lecturers, and administrative staff – from time to time painfully brought us back to rigid divisions. At the time when these incidents occurred, partners and students would both observe that this was both to be expected and to be valued: “This *is* the work”, we would say to each other. And, for sure, “the work” of *CHANGE NOW!* was not so much (or at least not only) in its performances, conference papers and other public outcomes, but also in the often unseen and messy work of trying to meet each other and work together across difference. The incidents of *failing* to hold safer space were also where learning took place; and yet, at the same time, it is impor-

tant to constantly return to the question of who is learning from whom, and at what expense.

Another challenge of the project was that in many of the participating schools, profound changes were taking place at the same time as *CHANGE NOW!* was happening. In some schools, colleagues were in the midst of institutional re-structuring that made their own roles even more precarious; in others, controversial changes of directorship and management structures were taking place raising questions of institutional racism. Almost all staff were simultaneously managing social safety cases in their own institutional roles in parallel with contributing to *CHANGE NOW!* in ways that certainly heightened the relevance of the project but also had practical implications for the energy that could be brought to it. The very things we were trying to “study” or practice together were also the conditions for the project itself. We were trying to learn from each other about social safety in the midst of feeling unsafe ourselves; we were trying to learn from each other about how to dismantle oppressive and violent power structures in theatre and theatre education at the same time as being differently caught up in their mechanisms. The value of the embodied knowledges that come from these different lived experiences in relation to social safety, equity and systemic violence and cannot be under-estimated. But at the same time, they can of course also be sources of harm and trauma that present barriers to other kinds of education, artistic work and knowledge development. All this is to say that the capacity of students and staff to participate in the project were shaped dif-

ferently by complex configurations of circumstances that overlap and deviate from each other, including: financial precarity; the harmful impact of ongoing systemic oppressions and past traumas; the unequally distributed effects of COVID and the War in Ukraine; burn-out and exhaustion through over-work, and “personal” experiences of grief and loss, family and relationship problems, health issues. If we have learned anything from this project, then perhaps it relates to the fundamental importance of greater acknowledgment of and reciprocal care for what we are each bringing with us into our collective encounters – before what is framed as “the real work” even begins.

Whilst as a project we do need to acknowledge and hold ourselves accountable for our mistakes, we hope we can also be proud to see *CHANGE NOW!* as the site where some truly joyful solidarities have been fostered among staff and students alike: where new friendships have formed the ground for hybrid, liberatory practices to emerge and a sense of cross-institutional community is emerging that allows us to support each other through the ongoing work of transformation that we are engaged with in our different contexts.

## Summary of the chapters

The eighteen texts in this publication are organised into three main thematic parts. *Part I: Teaching, learning and power dynamics* focusses on theatre education; *Part II on Gender, sexuality and intimacy coordination*; and *Part III on Access, equity, anti-racism and decolonial-*

*ity*. Inevitably, the division into themed parts is somewhat arbitrary and certainly there are texts that could have been placed differently and common threads that run through the chapters across the sections. An intersectional approach to the analysis of power, oppression and liberation is also in play in many of the texts in ways which work against the false separation of questions of gender and sexuality from those of disability and race, for example. However, we have chosen to adopt this themed structure to try to give an indication of focus, albeit overlaying a more complex texture of interconnections between the contributions and the topics they address.

The texts and their authors have various relationships to the *CHANGE NOW!* project and the five European theatre schools that form its partners. In some cases, the texts are very much concerned with the discussion of working practices in the context of a particular partner institution. This is perhaps especially the case for the texts commissioned by the Polish project team, many of which (such as Kwaśniewska; Waligora; Adamiecka-Sitek et al) are focussed on projects and developments situated within *CHANGE NOW!*'s partner institution: the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art, in Warsaw. However it also applies to Bojana Mladenović's text which focusses on anti-racist work specifically undertaken in the context of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam; and the student reflections in Hilary Jones' chapter which are situated in their experiences of training at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow. Other texts address the project themes in relation to non-part-

ner institutions and the working fields in different national contexts in ways that we hope can enable cross-comparison. In some cases, authors are themselves members of staff at the partner institutions in ways that offer 'insider knowledge' but also involve the complex strategic question of what can and cannot be said about the institution in the public domain and by whom. The willingness to engage in institutional critique and self-critique is not without its risk for some of the authors here and indeed there is already an experience of the harmful backlash that can come from challenging dominant ways of working that is shared across our different national contexts in ways that this publication may support us to recognise.

If this publication is in part about its partner institutions, it is also a form of documentation of the four core *CHANGE NOW!* sessions mentioned above. That is, in many cases, authors were also invited contributors to these gatherings: whether as guest speakers and/or as leaders of workshop sessions for staff and students. Rajni Shah led a hybrid listening session for the kick-off and co-presented a performative reading *Listening across Difference* with Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca in Warsaw; Szymon Adamczak and Elio Steffen presented on their project on *queering feedback* in both Amsterdam and Warsaw; Caspar Weimann led a workshop on the role of queerness in acting practices for the Paris session; Hilary Jones led an intimacy coordination workshop in Amsterdam and together with Meryem Elise Şengün presented *Intimacy Coordination: A Tale of Rights, Resistance and Revolution* on Warsaw conference; Carly Thompson and

Mira Thompson hosted an *Access Intimacy* workshop for staff in Amsterdam and did a performative reading of the *Letters from Lying Down* for the Warsaw session; Marine Bachelot-Nguyen and Penda Diouf were both invited speakers at the Paris conference. *The Club* had its online presentation open to all schools participating in the project, followed by a conversation with the entire creative team who talked about their innovative methods of work. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Weronika Szczawińska, director of *The Club*, spoke at the Warsaw conference about the *new policy of corporeality at the Warsaw Academy*. Agnieszka Jakimiak and Monika Kwaśniewska also *presented their papers* at the same conference while Katarzyna Waligóra moderated a panel discussion on *intimacy coordination in the realities of the Polish theater system*. Katarzyna Renes, the author of the closing text *How I overdosed on Artyzol\*: a story of my life with cultural projects* is the main coordinator of CHANGE NOW! In some cases, the content of these sessions is directly discussed in the texts (eg. Weimann); in others, the texts were the basis for the sessions (eg. Thompson and Everaert). With some contributions (eg. arribas and nestel; Smith; Mladenović), the authors were not directly involved in the CHANGE NOW! project, but were invited to contribute to this publication because of the resonance of their work within a partner institution with the core project themes of social safety, equity, access, inclusion, power dynamics and non-violent methods of theatre, performance and education.

The texts in this volume address the reader in a variety of different modalities and tones of voice, many

of which do not conform to dominant norms as to what counts as “academic” writing. More traditional academic texts are present, but they appear alongside and interwoven with other forms including exchanges of letters, personal reflections, manifesto-like statements, transcribed presentations. This has been our deliberate choice: to invite contributors to share their different modes of thinking in the form and style of writing that they need to use; avoiding tendencies towards standardization and the hierarchization of different knowledges that so often occurs in academic contexts. Conventional academic essays allow certain types of knowledge to manifest, but not others. Whilst practices of literature review and reasoned argument give an example of what rigorous research looks like in a certain context, publications like this can also offer theatre educators and makers the space to experiment with what might constitute rigor, integrity or a ‘contribution to knowledge’ on different terms.

In *Part I: Power dynamics in teaching, learning and collective study*, we begin with an essay by Julia Bee and Gerko Egert which departs from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s (2013) notion of ‘collective study’ to explore the pedagogical techniques involved in the emergence of teaching and learning events in art, particularly those that take place outside of ‘dominant institutional settings’ (Bee and Egert). This discussion is situated with reference to their work in *nocturne*: a platform based in Germany, initiated by the authors, that gathers pragmatic techniques for experimental knowledge production across art, academia, and activism. Here,

teaching is no longer considered as the ‘explanation of existing knowledge’ but as the combination of experimentation and learning understood as ‘the art of creating situations from which something new can emerge’ (Bee and Egert). The second text is an essay by Monika Kwaśniewska which looks at three examples of student performance projects produced at the Academy of Theater Arts in Kraków (ATA) thematizing the impact of the #MeToo movement on Polish theater. Drawing from interviews with their creators combined with performance analysis, Kwaśniewska suggests that the projects enabled their participants to conduct practical research into ‘the mechanisms, sources and consequences of violence in educational and artistic processes’. The third contribution in this section is a text by Agnieszka Jakimiak which also builds from lived experience at the Theatre Academy in Kraków in order to analyse how authoritarian power dynamics are translated from classroom to rehearsal rooms and to propose an alternative approach to theatrical production which she calls “ignorant stagemastering”, informed by the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “ignorant schoolmaster” (1991). The final essay in this section is by Sheila Ragunathan which attends to the intricacies of an everyday example from her practice as a teacher of colour leading post-colonial theory seminars in the German university context. Focussing on how coloniality plays out in the classroom, Ragunathan notes the recurring desire of students ‘to talk about the otherness of racialized subjects’ and the resistance to engaging with texts that demand a more

fundamental (self)interrogation of the imperialist norms at work in their own notions of knowledge and difference.

*Part II* of the publication is focussed on *Gender, sexuality and intimacy coordination*. It begins with the transcript of a conversation with the women who created and performed in a play called *The Club*: a student-led initiative which was co-produced by the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw and the theatre, TR Warszawa, premiering in June 2021. In the conversation, the creative team discuss the ways in which *The Club* emerged from the context of the students’ experience of structural gender inequality embedded in the acting program of their institution, but then went on to enable the creation of an empowering performance that aimed not to ‘call out’ but ‘to highlight and disarm the mechanisms of violence against women in the art world’ (Szczenińska). The second text in this section introduces the topic of ‘intimacy coordination’ with the transcript of a presentation given at the Warsaw session by project team member, Hilary Jones from partner school the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), together with participating *CHANGE NOW!* students: Molly Quinn and Meryem Sengun. The text briefly introduces intimacy coordination particularly as it has been defined in the UK context by practitioners like the British movement director Ita O’Brian, before inviting the students to share their experience of intimacy coordination in the context of acting and dance education at the RCS. Intimacy coordination remains the focus for the next essay by Katarzyna Waligora. In the text, Waligora draws from contextual research and observations to dis-

cuss a series of intimacy coordination workshops offered to students by the Polish psychologist and intimacy coordinator, Kaja Wesolek-Podziemska in the context of the academic project *Safe Space. Good practices and tools for the transformation of the Polish theater system*. This project, led Agata Adamiecka-Sitek at Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, was motivated by the findings of independent research commissioned by the academy that located abuse, discrimination and boundary violations at the school.

In the next essay, we shift from intimacy coordination to frameworks of queering – starting with a text on performance dramaturgy and queer mentorship by theatre-maker, Szymon Adamczak. Adamczak occupies a special position in the *CHANGE NOW!* project as both an alumni and current research fellow of partner school the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam, and as a theatre-maker born in Poland who continues to move between Poland and the Netherlands in his transnational work as an artist and HIV activist. In his autobiographical essay, Adamczak revisits his dramaturgical and pedagogical practice as an example of queer positionality, building on the work of queer theorists from Sara Ahmed, Richard Ford and Gregg Bordowitz. As Adamczak notes, the essay operates in the publication as a kind of ‘partner piece’ for the essay that follows it by Elia Steffen. Adamczak and Steffen are the co-conveners of the queer performance pedagogy and feedback project *In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities (IPOP)* supported by the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam of

which they are both former students. As Steffen puts it: ‘IPOP was created to respond to limited, disjointed queer educational resources within the ATD’. In the essay, she then goes on to discuss how the IPOP project has used reading, feedback and participatory workshop practices to research their core questions, including: “how can the ATD, and universities more broadly, better support LGBTQ+ students including their well-being, artistic growth, and education development?” and “How can queer ways of making, knowledge sharing and relating improve and problematize educational goals and outcomes?” In the final essay in this section, Caspar Weimann reflects on the systematic discrimination of queer actors in the German-speaking context and going on to argue that we need to fundamentally re-evaluate dominant understandings of acting – particularly in terms of supposed ‘neutrality’ – in order to make actor training institutions more accessible to and inclusive of queer and nonbinary actors. The text builds on Weimann’s experience as an acting teacher and equal opportunity officer focusing on queer issues at the Academy of Performing Arts Baden-Württemberg, but also touches on how their notion of the ‘autonomous actor’ was received by participants in the context of the Change Now workshop they delivered in Paris.

The third part of the publication *focuses on Access, equity, anti-racism and decoloniality*. We begin this section with an essay by aster arribas and antje nestel which beautifully connects to the previous part through its reference to the notion of “neuroqueering”: ‘a process of actively constructing worlds outside the realm of neu-

rotypicality'. In this co-authored contribution, the authors invite readers to engage in their process of 'writing-with', reading between or across two columns of text, as a mode of introduction to their project, *shy\*play*. Jointly initiated by arribas and nestel in 2022, *shy\*play* is a research project exploring neurodiversity as relation in art and education in the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam. The text addresses how neurotypical norms operate in art educational systems and explores the relation between shyness, introversion and neurodivergence in the context of hosting workshops for students and an intersectional neuroqueer theoretical framework informed by thinkers like Nick Walker (2021). The second text is Carly Everaert and Mira Thompson that takes the form of an exchange of letters departing from Mia Mingus' notion of 'access intimacy' and classes taught to Scenography students at the ATD as part of Everaert's *Radical Thinking* course. For Mingus, access intimacy is "That elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else „gets” your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level" (Mingus 2011). In the context of the [Warsaw session](#), it was important that we, as audience, were lying down as we listened to Everaert and Thompson reading their correspondence. A correspondence which begins with Thompson's reflections on her work on/in arts and disability justice as someone who 'live(s) horizontally for a good amount of the day' (Thompson). So perhaps, as a reader of this publication, you could also practice lying down when you come to

read that chapter and see what insights emerge from that embodied experience.

The next contribution in *Part III* is a piece by Rajni Shah who is also a researcher at the ATD. As Shah lays out in their own words at the start of the text, this writing is made up of 'a series of personal reflections on "listening"' which, for Shah, refers to 'an embodied attentive state, including, but not limited to, the ears.' Writing from their own experiences as a trans non-binary person of colour, the hyperlinked text invites the reader to travel between this writing and other online materials within a consideration of the relations between listening, anti-racist and anti-colonial work. The fourth contribution in this section is by Joy Mariama Smith: a piece which makes an offering to the reader to orient themselves in the text through a series of 'terms of engagement' (Hennessy 2017) including: whiteness, racialized aesthetics and disidentification. In what follows, the text itself performatively enables a relation between the author – who positions themselves as a 'queer, non-binary, immigrant, and Black with indigenous to the Americas and African diasporic ancestry' – and the reader who is also called upon to consider – in and as the act of reading – how they themselves 'are submerged, implicated, complicit, [and] affected by white supremacy culture' (Smith). Joy Mariama Smith is a mentor in the [School for New Dance Development \(SNDO\)](#) within the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam: a department which is led by Bojana Mladenović, the author of the next essay in this section. Here, Mladenović reflects on seven years of anti-co-

lonial and anti-racist work as the head of SNDO with the aim ‘to make the school safer and less violent for students of color and a space of transformative (read: less violence inducing) learning for the white population of students, teachers and staff’. Her text is divided into two parts: the first focused on the period in which SNDO sought to address how the ‘colonial modernity matrix’ had historically shaped its curriculum and culture; and the second characterised by the research initiative *SNDO Critical Whiteness*, developed in partnership with Joy Mariama Smith which sought to enable their community of students and teachers ‘to critically and transformatively engage with the notion of whiteness’ (Mladenović).

The final two contributions to this section maintain the focus on coloniality and racism but shift our attention to the French context. The first is by the writer, actor and director Marine Bachelot-Nguyen, who is also a founding member of the collective [Decolonizing the Arts](#) – which was formed in 2015 to insist on better representation of racialized people in French stage and screen but also to advocate for ‘the decolonization of the imaginary’ (Nguyen). In the text, Bachelot-Nguyen discusses how she has explored the entangled mechanisms of racism and sexism, homophobia and colonialism in her own fictions and documentaries. She then goes on to address how the decolonization of the imaginary might take place both through casting choices and the proliferation and diversification of models of racialized characters beyond exoticizing stereotypes. This emphasis on the imaginary also connects this piece to the one that follows,

where Penda Diouf recalls Édouard Glissant’s statement: “We will not transform the world if we do not transform the imaginary”. In her contribution, Diouf challenges the French perception of their own anti-racism, drawing from her own lived experience to address how racialized exclusion operates through the decisions of theatre reading committees and the double-standards of festival programmers. Crucially, Diouf looks ahead to a time when racialized artists no longer feel obliged to expend energy participating in endless roundtables on ‘diversity in theater’ and can focus on their own creative work.

By way of closing publication, we end with a Coda authored by Katarzyna Renes, the Project Manager for the *CHANGE NOW!* project itself. Here Renes reads her own lived experience of precarious labour in the field of cultural management through the lens of Kuba Szreder’s (2021) notion of “artyzol”: “the creativity opiate secreted in the process of artistic circulation [that] causes artists, curators or assistants to engage in art, even if their activity leads to poverty and frustration” (Szreder in Renes). Situated in her own experience of the Polish work culture as built on an “ethos of effort and sacrifice” (Kubisa et al 2022), but also her work on international projects, Renes’ contribution powerfully considers how contemporary financial conditions and funding structures produce both addictive and harmful forms of lived precarity. In line with the aim to increase the attention and care we bring to the constitutive conditions that shape the very nature of any given encounter or ‘project’, this behind-the-scenes confessional by Renes seems an apt way

to conclude – albeit that it, along with the different perspectives of the other contributions, paints a stark picture of the complex challenges ahead.

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Part — I

Power dynamics  
in teaching, learning  
and collective study

# Learning to Experiment, Sharing Techniques

*Julia Bee,  
Gerko Egert*

“[S]tudy is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity.”<sup>1</sup>

“To study” is an activity – it combines teaching and learning, two activities that are usually considered separate. In the book *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten set out to distinguish the collective activity of study from the study that takes place within educational and academic institutions. They point out that collective study happens while playing, making music, biking, discussing with friends, traveling. While teaching and learning in Western societies is deemed to take place within educational institutions, and is structured by evaluation systems, assessments, and grades, Harney and Moten show that study is by no means limited to these spaces. They argue that most study happens beyond institutional settings. Study is collective, sometimes you are a learner and sometimes a teacher, but often you are both. Teaching and learning do not just happen, they are not only emergent events, they are made possible through a series of techniques. Sometimes these techniques are visible, while often they

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<sup>1</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions: 2013),110.

go unnoticed. These techniques – rather than the institutions with which they are associated – are what we are interested in.

### **nocturne: A platform for teaching and learning**

Often, we meet scholars, artists, and activists who have developed ideas and pedagogical techniques in their personal practices and in dialogue with their students and workshop participants. In order to share these techniques beyond their initial contexts – classroom, studio, workshops – we initiated *nocturne*,<sup>2</sup> a platform for experimental knowledge production across art, academia, and activism. It is a platform that grew from our curiosity and enthusiasm for the many experimental pedagogical formats that exist outside of dominant institutional settings. It brings together a series of techniques for experimental teaching sourced from across the fields of art, performance, philosophy, theater, film, and media studies. Each contribution consists of a technique that was developed during seminars and workshops, and in studios and rehearsal spaces. The contributions include: a collaborative fabulation of a bank robbery; the now familiar format of the reading group; writing workshops; collage; film essays; and a group performance. The platform is intended to offer an insight into the field of experimental and collaborative pedagogy. It is understood as open-source in the sense that it is an invitation to try, adapt, and further develop the techniques in other contexts. In this respect,

<sup>2</sup> See [www.nocturne-plattform.de](http://www.nocturne-plattform.de)

by collecting and documenting the techniques, we are contributing to the continued circulation of knowledge that extends beyond institutional boundaries.

We focus primarily on techniques that use artistic practices not only as illustrations of theories, but that take them seriously as practical ways of thinking. As such, the techniques are connected to academic education and political activism. We are interested in the diversity of techniques and procedures at work in artistic practices and the processual knowledge they produce. These techniques include playing, dancing, creating space, montaging, collaging, writing, etc. Through reading groups, teach-ins, or collective fabulations,<sup>3</sup> they question the hierarchical order between production and reproduction, practice and theory, research and teaching.

Through our engagement with experimental pedagogies, we build upon a long history of activity including that of Black Mountain College; the Feminist Studio Workshop; the work of artists such as Lygia Clark, Miklós Erdély, and Dóra Maurer; and educators such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Recent initiatives include the Performing Arts Forum in St. Erme and the SenseLab in Montréal. Most examples are practice(d) outside of established institutions, while others are part of existing curriculums for art and design.<sup>4</sup> These foundations are echoed in the techniques explored in *nocturne*. Some techniques, like the contributions by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, were devel-

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Mediators," in *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 121-134.

<sup>4</sup> (Paim et al. 2019; Egert et al. 2015, Jaschke et al. 2012).

oped in the context of one of the projects, while others, like Juli Reinartz's or Inga Zimprich's engaged with this history more indirectly.

## How-To...

In our first publication *Learning to Experiment, Sharing Techniques: A Speculative Handbook*<sup>5</sup> we adopt the format of a “how-to” style manual to “document” the techniques included. By mimicking the how-to of a handbook we emphasize the pragmatic approach to every technique. It is a book to use. And yet its pragmatism does not equate with a goal-oriented approach. In fact, for us, pragmatism is a form of engagement that is attuned to an actual situation but not limited to it. To avoid pragmatism becoming a means to an end, we emphasize its speculative dimension. It may seem paradoxical at first to use speculation and pragmatism simultaneously. But the logic of speculative pragmatism<sup>6</sup> allows us to think of techniques not as something one needs to earn or learn to master, but rather as a way to put into practice speculatively in the midst of an actual situation. Speculative how-tos, as we propose them, are open to appropriation. They are, in Brian Massumi's words, “enabling constraints.”<sup>7</sup> A technique that straddles the line between pragmatism and speculation

5 Julia Bee, Gerko Egert (eds.), *Experimente lernen, Techniken tauschen. Ein spekulatives Handbuch [Learning to Experiment, Sharing Techniques: A Speculative Handbook]* (Weimar/Berlin: Nocturne, 2020).

6 Erin Manning, Brian Massumi. *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7 Brian Massumi, Brian and Joel McKim. “Of Microperceptions and Micropolitics. An Interview with Brian Massumi,” in *Inflexions. A Journal for Research-Creation*, 3 (2009), [http://www.inflexions.org/n3\\_massumihtml.html](http://www.inflexions.org/n3_massumihtml.html).

in a performative way is *The Perfect Robbery* by Juli Reinartz. The task is simple: plan to rob a bank. While time and location situate the technique in the here and now, the task immediately opens up a space for collective planning fueled by the speculative energy of criminal conspiracy, making it speculative in its radical sense. It is a technique of future problem-solving rather than free-floating imagination. This combination of pragmatism and speculation is shared by many of the techniques included on *nocturne*. They are pragmatic because they orient an action or a collective toward processes embedded in the here and now. They are speculative because they transform this process, feeding it into new situations, and thereby changing the collective as much as the situation itself.

### **The perfect robbery**

Juli Reinartz and Tea Tupajic

4-5 days à 5-6 hours

10-15 participants

Possible as a stand-alone workshop, as part of a festival or as a seminar with students, doctoral candidates and teachers

Preferably in two rooms, one of which is equipped with tables, chairs and pencils, the other empty and spacious

Plenty of coffee, water and tea

1-2 organizers, who prepare the joint process and later become part of the group

Additional 3-4 invited experts to guide the mini-workshops, which do not have to take part in the planning of the robbery. They facilitate a 2-hour workshop session, answer questions, and respond to participant's questions

A list of heist movies

A computer, a projector and internet access

A selected bank which is easy to reach and a fixed date for the robbery

### Timeline

The course of the workshop is self-organized

The group of participants organizes the progress of their planning themselves.

The organizers, however, determine some key dates in advance:

Day: Introductory round and visit / Visit to the selected bank

Day: mini-workshop and movie night

Day: Mini-Workshop 2

Day: Mini-Workshop 3

Day: possibly mini-workshop 4

Final performance

From: Juli Reinartz: "Der perfekte Bankraub" (<https://nocturne-plattform.de/text/der-perfekte-bankraub>)

## Pragmatic Experimentation

The techniques gathered at *nocturne* are not simply practice-based, but pragmatic in their philosophical sense. They take experience seriously as a starting point from which to work with theoretical concepts.<sup>8</sup> Rather than just applying thinking to experience or experience to thinking, the relation between the two realms – theory and practice, thinking and experiencing – grounds every practice. This logic of co-composition shifts teaching from an act of mediating learning content, to a form of experimentation in which content and techniques are in constant dialogue and constantly rearranged, making the very distinctions between theory and practice, and concept and experience, even harder to maintain. When we think of pedagogical techniques and the activity of teaching, we do not limit it to the explanation of existing knowledge, but think of them as situations joined together by learning and experimentation, from which topics and techniques emerge and are experimented with. We consider learning in a broad and embodied sense, focusing on the art of creating situations from which something new can emerge. This is why we turn to those spaces where art, activism, and pedagogy are intertwined.

Through her work as a teacher, bell hooks has shown us how the personal experiences of teachers and learners – inside and outside of the classroom – are key for pedagogical processes. These experiences are social

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 2015; William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*; Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and other Essays*, 1967.

and saturated by power structures. It is these power structures that must become the starting point of a political and critical reflection on education.

The questioning of existing structures generates new access to knowledge spaces, especially for those who are formally or informally excluded due to their background and biography.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, *nocturne* places artistic research in dialogue with classical examples of social emancipation in the fields of media, art, and cultural studies. The aim of artistic pedagogies is not the promotion of creativity as an end in itself, but the activation of emancipative and reflexive processes on the level of perception and bodily activity.

bell hooks, writing from an African-American working-class perspective, sees her teaching practice as a professor and lecturer at a university as an activity of change, liberation, and empowerment. In *Teaching to Transgress*,<sup>10</sup> the first title of her trilogy on teaching, hooks describes her encounters with those who resisted the different and radical forms of pedagogy she tried to put into practice. According to hooks, freedom and transgression can by no means be achieved by simply negating outmoded pedagogies. New techniques and new pedagogical concepts are needed to empower precisely those students (African-Americans, immigrants, women\*, first-generation academics) who are all too often overlooked in existing structures. For hooks, teaching can form a tech-

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979).

10 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice to Freedom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

nique of transformation and collectivity, “The power of the liberatory classroom is in fact the power of the learning process, the work we do to establish a community.”<sup>11</sup> Affects such as “excitement” and “fun”<sup>12</sup> are prerequisites for learning and teaching. She calls for pedagogical techniques that focus less on teaching and more on the “atmosphere” of learning itself.<sup>13</sup> This shows how affect is not incidental, but in fact determines how habitus makes one move subconsciously away from or toward certain learning situations.<sup>14</sup> We think of terms like “excitement” as affective spaces of possibility and ways in which bodies affect other bodies and can themselves be affected.<sup>15</sup>

## Learning outside of the University

In recent years, non-academic learning formats have gained traction. They connect to the radical pedagogies of the 1970s and 1980s, to feminist and Black reading circles, to empowerment and consciousness raising, and to decolonial struggles in the Americas. They reference the pedagogical and therapeutic reforms of Fernand Oury and Aïda Vasquez<sup>16</sup>, Paulo Freire<sup>17</sup>, bell hooks<sup>18</sup>, Félix

11 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 153.

12 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 7.

13 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 7.

14 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. (Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, 1990).

15 Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

16 Aïda Vasquez, Fernand Oury (1969). “The Educational Technique of Freinet.” *Prospects in Education* 1: 43–51.

17 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

18 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice to Freedom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

Guattari<sup>19</sup>, and Fernand Deligny<sup>20</sup>. Movements influenced by these thinkers, teachers, artists, and political activists, have invented ways of learning that aim to make social, individual, and institutional transformation and change.

Next to critical developments in pedagogy, artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century engaged repeatedly in new and different forms of teaching and learning. For example, Allan Kaprow explored playful pedagogies in his happenings, extending activities of teaching and learning into the realm of art and feeding artistic techniques into the curriculum of schools and universities.<sup>21</sup> Or, in a similar manner, composer, musician, and university professor George E. Lewis, in *Collaborative Improvisation as Critical Pedagogy*,<sup>22</sup> describes his artistic practice of jazz as an act of collective mediation in experimental improvisation: “In this view, improvisation becomes a critical practice as well as a means to aesthetic statement - a space where discontinuity, disruption, support, and struggle become audible pathways to new experience.”<sup>23</sup> Both of them<sup>24</sup> tie in with the theories of pragmatism mentioned above. Their artistic engagements placed experience at the very heart of learning. Rather than the teaching serving as a way to bestow knowledge upon stu-

19 Félix Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality. Texts and Interviews 1955-1971* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015).

20 Fernand Deligny, *Cartes et lignes d'erre/Maps and wander lines: Traces du réseau de Fernand Deligny 1969 - 1979* (Paris: L'Arachnéen, 2013).

21 Vesna Krstich, “The Pedagogy of Play: Fluxus, Happenings, and Curriculum Reform in the 1960s,” in *C Magazine* 131 (2015): 14–18.

22 George E. Lewis, “Collaborative Improvisation as Critical Pedagogy,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 34, (2014): 40–47.

23 Lewis, 46.

24 Lewis more implicitly, Kaprow explicitly in his interest in the philosophy of John Dewey.

dents, the impact of the material learning environment became the focus of their pedagogies.

Today, at film or theater festivals, museums and galleries, both formal and informal learning takes place. Silent University, School of Commons, Training for the Future, and Black Market for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge are just a few of the many frameworks in which alternative modes of learning are being organized. In Black Market, Hannah Hurzig for example assembles teachers and learners who, in precisely-timed sessions, share, and produce knowledge through one-to-one conversations. The people she invites are experts in many regards. Hurzig is explicitly concerned with creating informal structures in which a broad spectrum of knowledge is negotiated with and circulated.

While many of these projects share references to educational institutions by referring to themselves as schools or universities, others, like the Social Muscle Club, emphasize the collective aspect of their work, while still being places of learning and sharing. Centered on a game-like structure of give and take, the Social Muscle Club developed a technique to create social relations. Its engagement with learning and training forms of collectivity makes it a key contribution to the techniques of alternative and experimental forms of pedagogy.

Most aforementioned projects resort to the workshop as a format to facilitate their pedagogical and collective engagements. The workshop – be it a collective movement session, a hackathon, or a reading group – has developed out of the need to question the institution of the

university. Especially nowadays, in times of increasingly modularized university education, workshops offer a way to collectively learn outside of established institutions.<sup>25</sup> These new sites and formats of “other knowledge”<sup>26</sup> often combine political intervention and collective organization. Many workshops establish situations that are open, while creating techniques that others can use in new and different contexts.

### Technique and Institution

On March 24, 1965, teachers and students across the U.S. left their scheduled seminars to spend the entire night in so-called “teach-ins,” debating U.S. policy on the Vietnam War. It was an act of public protest but more so – as Marshal Sahlins, one of the teachers involved noted – this inter-university, nationwide debate on the Vietnam War and U.S. Cold War politics produced “a genuine intellectual experience.” Sahlins elaborates, “for many the first they ever had on campus, perhaps because for the first time *both* teachers and students were discussing, seriously and with respect for each other’s opinions, something both were deeply interested in understanding.”<sup>27</sup> This example shows that it is impossible for the university (the school, the museum, etc.) to capture the powerful act of teaching. In fact, Sahlins’ quote shows that, when teaching leaves the institution, it becomes an

25 Anja Groten, “Workshop,” in *Making Matters*, ed. Janneke Wesseling, Florian Cramer (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2022).

26 Kathrin Busch (Ed.), *Anderes Wissen. Kunstformen der Theorie* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016).

27 Marshall Sahlins, *Culture as Practice. Selected Essays* (New York: Zone, 2000).

“intellectual experience” and a truly collective practice. Teach-ins opened up a space for other and new pedagogical techniques to emerge, techniques that were academic as much as activist. The simple shift of time and location produced other knowledges as much as collectivity.

As this example shows, techniques are more than an institutional intervention. As much as we find techniques at work in institutions they can also challenge and work against existing and emerging institutions. Techniques can transform power relations as well as ingrained patterns of acting and thinking. Techniques can render background structures conscious<sup>28</sup> and create communities that oppose the processes of institutionalization and/or neoliberalization in the spirit of “lifelong learning.” Techniques are neither good or bad; institutional or revolutionary. They can always be hacked and used in different ways. It is, to use Alfred North Whitehead’s phrase, a question of “style,”<sup>29</sup> how a technique is used determines its effects and impacts. In this sense, the style of experimentation can help to keep techniques in a process of continuous transformation. Changing and combining them with other techniques prevents their sedimentation into a rule or even law. It is sometimes necessary to continue a discussion beyond the timeframe of the seminar, for instance to allow an extensive debate on foreign policy, as in the case of the teach-ins.

28 Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon.” in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. by Redstockings (New York: Random House, 1978), 144–50.

29 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

## Create access!

Teach-ins, workshops, and informal reading groups are modes of organizing learning beyond institutional frameworks, especially in countries with extremely high educational costs. Many of them aim to facilitate learning differently than universities – decolonized, democratized, and organized in solidarity.<sup>30</sup> They create new collectives of thought, experience, and imagination. But even the simple act of reading together can lead to the exclusion of others and create hierarchies among its participants. Especially in collectives working across art, academia, and activism, the use of language and the distribution of who speaks when and for how long can institute and reinforce social power relations. How, then, can we create techniques that challenge these structures? How to invent formats that do not privilege certain (often academic) knowledge, but fosters the exchange between different forms and practices of knowledge?

Sometimes a small shift in the spatial setting or a playful formalization of who talks and when can create an entirely different dynamic. Conceptual speed dating, a technique stemming from the practice of the Sense-Lab and shared by Brian Massumi is one such attempt. Organizing a text discussion in a flow of multiple short conversations decentralizes discussions, de-personalizes arguments, and creates new modes of collective thinking.

While such techniques to increase access often stem from contexts outside of educational institutions they can be important contributions to the techniques of schools and universities. Even in countries without tuition fees, the informal ways access is blocked to the university or to an academic career are numerous. Pierre Bourdieu has described these unconscious forms as exclusions and self-exclusions with his concept of habitus.<sup>31</sup> Didier Eribon, in *Returning to Reims*,<sup>32</sup> explored these thresholds through his own experience and made vivid how complex exclusions function in the educational system.

### Conceptual Speed Dating

- Choose a generative text.
- Choose a minor concept weaving through the generative text.
- Ask each person in the group to count off as a one or a two.
- Instruct the ones that they are “posts.”
- Instruct the twos that they are “flows.”
- Ask the posts to find a post: a spot in the room where they would like to have a conversation.
- Ask the flows to pair up with a post.
- Direct everyone to a page in the text where the minor concept occurs.

<sup>30</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (St. Martin's Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu, *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*, 1979, Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 1990, Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, (Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e), 2013).

- Ask the participants to discuss the function of the minor concept, staying as close as possible to the text, with detailed attention to how it is constructed.
- Notify participants that when exactly five minutes are up they will hear a signal, and that when they hear the signal they must end their conversation immediately, even if they are in the middle of a word.
- When the five-minute signal sounds, ask all flows to move to the next post in a clockwise direction.
- Repeat eight to ten times.
- Bring the group back together and discuss in plenary session what was discovered about the minor concept and the text.

From: Brian Massumi, “Collective Expression. A Radical Pragmatics”, in: *The Principle of Unrest*, Open Humanities Press, London 2017, p.p 111-140, here: 111-112. [http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Massumi\\_2017\\_The-Principle-of-Unrest.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Massumi_2017_The-Principle-of-Unrest.pdf)

German version: <https://nocturne-plattform.de/text/kollektiver-ausdruck>

## **Bodystrike**

Feminist Health Care Research Group

Find a quiet, comfortable place where you feel at ease. Prepare what you need for this exercise (pen and paper, timer). Make yourself comfortable. Breathe deeply and feel inside yourself.

Can you think of a physical reaction that you have learned is embarrassing / out of place in academic / artistic / institu-

tional / school spaces and that you should hide / be ashamed of or discard?

Can you think of a specific physical reaction? Can you trace its history, how it has accompanied you, and how it has changed over time. Red marks, stuttering, diarrhea: when did they strike you? Did they bother you? Did you think about them a lot? Did you learn what helps you?

Can you feel today what this physical reaction was trying to tell you? Do you feel something about it today that you can accept and appreciate?

Do you have physical symptoms of discomfort today when you are in spaces of power and norming? What are they? What do they remind you of?

Try to remember a moment when you could perceive this discomfort in others, such as stuttering, red spots, sweat, nervousness, shame. Try to visualize, based on this situation, what power relations were at work in this situation. If possible, try to visualize how differently the people present were affected by these power relations.

Try to write down associatively which things, people, feelings, expressions can be considered inappropriate in academic/university/art spaces due to this subtle and covert way of exercising power.

Try to write down associatively what you miss in academic / university / art spaces, by the fact that things, people, feelings and expressions remain absent or suppressed.

Do you have a sense of which parts of yourself you would rather assign to a knowing and working body and which parts you keep out or split off? Do you have a conception or an image of your “knowing body,” a posture, clothing, way of speaking that you adopt in order to correspond more to the spaces – permeated by these power relations - and to get along well in them?

Do you have, the other way around, an idea of the parts in you that perhaps rather form your “counter-knowing body?” What does it do, what does it communicate to you? Which wishes does it have and to whom does it most likely make contact?

From: Feministische Gesundheitsrecherchegruppe (Inga Zimprich): Körperstreik (<https://nocturne-plattform.de/text/korperstreik>)

Every pedagogical relation and every technique must therefore ask how it addresses exclusions based on gender, race, class, and dis\_ability. The techniques assembled on the platform, *nocturne*, aim to counter subconscious exclusions and increase access on multiple levels. When sharing these techniques between the artistic, academic, and activist field, the question of access makes it important not to simply reproduce techniques in differ-

ent settings. What creates access in one situation can be exclusionary in another one. Every technique needs to be tried out and developed in context-sensitive ways.

## Make situations!

We founded *nocturne* with an enthusiasm for learning and unlearning as critical and emancipative educational processes. In this context, we understand pedagogy primarily as a way of working with techniques to produce collective situations i.e., less autodidactic or individualistic learning. Here, we have primarily social and ecological processes in mind. Learning also means the experience of becoming different. This means not to be re-educated, but to create and encounter every new learning situation openly. In emancipatory teaching, chaos is used in a productive way. Deleuze and Guattari<sup>33</sup> describe this by proposing their concept of the refrain: Learning is a chaosmos, a “rhythm”<sup>34</sup> between chaos and its frame. This refrain causes a transformation of knowledge as much as its transforms the self of all participants, teachers, and learners. In a situation where learning takes place, the self is not individualized, it “transindividuates.”<sup>35</sup> To think of learning as an act of trans/individuation affirms a way of thinking through the situation and the milieu/media it creates.<sup>36</sup>

33 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

34 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313.

35 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Cambridge (MA) and London: MIT Press, 2013).

36 Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.” *Cultural Studies Review* 11, 1 (2005), 187.

Trans/individuation happens through the techniques of learning, teaching, and designing.

In institutionalized higher education, pedagogy and didactics (as helpful as they can be in some cases) are often subordinated to questions of efficiency. We are urged to complete trainings in didactics to use our pedagogical methods purposefully, to give proper feedback, and to learn how to grade. While it is important to reflect on our power positions in educational contexts, we are rarely taught in these trainings about the activist teaching techniques of Black writers, workers struggle at the university, liberation pedagogies of the Americas, or the ways second-wave feminism organized learning and unlearning. With *nocturne*, we want to build on these traditions. How to engage critically with the knowledge and affects produced by the university and other institutions is at the heart of the technique *Bodystrike* by the Feminist Health Care Research Group. Situated in the feminist tradition of self-organized health care, the technique offers way to work with the bodily and affective knowledge often sidelined in institutionalized processes of education.

### **Change the logistical university!**

The logistical university is, as Moten and Harney put it, a university of debt: Debt through student loans and debt through credits to be earned.<sup>37</sup> What the students get for their debt is skill. Instead of facts, the university teaches skills that can be used elsewhere, and

<sup>37</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 61.

skills that travel and make the students travel through the market economy. This flow of skills renders the university and its students logistical. If we go back a few years, skills training did not begin as a logistical fantasy but as a critique of the accumulation of facts (as described by Paulo Freire in his “banking model”<sup>38</sup> method) and came with the promise of increased freedom. In recent decades, the teaching of skills has increasingly replaced a critical discussion of knowledge and its practices. In the logistic university, skills are limited to their function as tools, which can be seamlessly adapted to every situation of economic production. If everything is transferable and applicable, any reference to the history, situation, and emancipatory politics of a technique is lost. When we engage in technique-sharing, we are not interested cookie-cutter applications that don’t engage with the situations from which the technique originates. We call for techniques that enable collectivity, solidarity, and openness. Elke Bippus and Monica Gaspar point out that the shift from content to competence (and thus to technique) can also bear the danger of feeding experimental ways of working known from art into all realms of economic production and education. Through collaborations between academia and the arts, precarization of both fields occurs, and this is highly based on self-exploitation. Creative techniques of the arts are fed into the field of capitalist labor, rehearsing its experimental character and accelerating precarious working conditions, which renders the arts as much as labor

<sup>38</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

logistical.<sup>39</sup> Yet a critique of neoliberalism should not be conflated with a critique of creativity and experimentation as such. We need to address the critical qualities inherent in experimental techniques. In view of this development as well as the increasing institutionalization of artistic research in the sense of its scientification, we want to ask how techniques can produce solidary and critical forms of collective working. How can we rethink creative collaboration starting from the techniques at work in a situation? How can we foster speculative practices, which go beyond use of goal-oriented techniques? We hope that the exchange of techniques of learning and unlearning can lead to a revaluation of the concept of technique in a non-utilitarian manner. Techniques de-essentialize learning and knowledge through the focus on their processual and situated nature. Sharing these techniques must include engagement with the situations from which they originated. Like *Everybody's Toolbox*<sup>40</sup> proposes for the field of performance and dance, we think of techniques and instructions as open-source. They are open to hacking, modification, and speculative adaptation. Each technique on the platform is an invitation to its reader to document their own experiences, and share the techniques they work with.

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<sup>39</sup> Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> See [www.everybodystoolbox.net](http://www.everybodystoolbox.net)

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# Alternative education

*Monika  
Kwaśniewska*

## Transformation process in Polish theater schools

The Polish theater's response to the international #MeToo movement was ill-timed and initially unfocused. The space where the movement resounded most broadly, starting a process of structural changes, were public theater schools; first, almost concurrently, the ones in Warsaw and Kraków, then the one in Łódź. In all three, the action was initiated by students or alumni, who broadened the scope of discussion on sexual harassment by shedding light on other acts of psychological, economic and structural violence, which often stem from the ultra-hierarchical character of Polish theater institutions. The younger generation's dissent against the educational and creative models that have been solidified by many years of practice to normalize various kinds of oppression is significant, and it brings hope for transformative processes to unfold.

By juxtaposing the initial response of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw (ADA; and then also of the Łódź Film School) with the events at the Academy of Theater Arts in Kraków (ATA), two different call-out strategies can be traced alongside the institutional reactions provoked by them. In the case of the Warsaw school, allegations against a professor, who was said to have violated personal boundaries of female student directors, were publicized in the media in 2018 (Adamiecka-Sitek et al. 2018). In Łódź, a serious discussion about violence started much later, in 2021, with a public Facebook post by Acting Department alumna

Anna Paliga, who listed instances of abuse experienced at the school by her and her classmates (Paliga 2021). Both call-outs induced an institutional reaction, with the response of the Łódź Film School being, I believe, less comprehensive. At the ADA, the complaint – which turned out to be a symptom of a broader problem – began a long-term transformation process. This included steps such as: conferences and academic projects (eg. *CHANGE NOW!* and *Safe Space. Good practices and tools for the transformation of the Polish theater system*) conducted in wide networks of collaboration with people from the non-artistic academia (lawyers, sociologists and psychologists); the implementation of new prevention procedures and response protocols; training for students and teachers, etc. Today, the ADA is undoubtedly a precursor of changes and a space for creating and implementing good practices for institutions of education and theater. In Warsaw, one response to these institutional initiatives has been the students' art projects, which have taken advantage of the expanded field of freedom and agency to search for new models of creative work (*Hymny*), including the exploration of the theme of violence (*The Club*).

At Kraków's ATA (with its Dance Department in Bytom and Puppetry Department in Wrocław), the breakthrough happened in the opposite order. The students' artistic action – including their graduation and examination performances – became a space for blowing the whistle on abuse and mechanisms of violence in education and artistic production. Although these call-outs did not have the character of official claims, but were framed as artistic

creations, it was difficult to detach them from the institutional context in which they were created, and which they self-referentially invoked. In Kraków, the turning point that initiated real institutional action was a script by Michał Telega, written as a class assignment and entitled: *The Actresses, or Sorry for Touching You* (Telega 2019). The author compiled his text from interviews with female student actors, who testified to various forms of abuse and discrimination they had faced at school and in artistic work. In response, an Ethics Code and the role of an Ethics Ombudsperson were implemented at the school. Nevertheless, the changes at the ATA are decidedly less systemic, less systematic and less transparent than at the ADA. On the other hand, student art projects exploring and pointing out the mechanisms of oppression, abuse and boundary violation at their school are created with striking regularity at the ATA, offering a framework for the development of new, interesting artistic processes.<sup>1</sup> One could perhaps conclude that the change at the ATA has maintained its grassroots character.

## Premise and research methods

In my current research on performances that thematize the impact of the #MeToo movement on the Polish theater, I look at such art projects created in theat-

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there have been occurrences of students at the ATA experiencing oppression by school authorities for producing performances on violence in theater and theater education. Such was the case of the performance *Słaby rok* [The Weak Year] in the school's branch in Wrocław. There also have been incidents such as a director's behavior called "molestation without touching" during the production of a graduation performance in Bytom. (See, respectively Waligóra 2019; Dzieciuchowicz 2021).

er schools. I posit that, for their authors, they functioned as ways to research the mechanisms, sources and consequences of violence in educational and artistic processes. Moreover, they have contributed to the rethinking, verification and modification of working methods, shifting them towards devised theater. They have also involved a self-analysis of their creators' own mistakes made during production – mostly regarding ethics. I consider these projects as a type of theater education to supplement the official curriculum.

Because I have already analyzed two such works elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, I would like to cover more unusual cases in this paper: *The #Rape of Lucrece*, *Othello* and *Rok pierwszy* [Year One], produced at the ATA. My information on the creative processes from which they emerged is based on the performances themselves, MA theses written about them, published academic papers, my interviews with Martyna Wawrzyniak, Wiktor Bagiński (the director interviewed me before he embraced Islam on December 19, 2022; the text authorized on condition of this information), Natalia Bielecka, Damian Sosnowski, Zdenka Pszczołowska and Anna Oramus, and short texts written by Katarzyna Nejman, Melania Grzesiewicz and Weronika Warchoń on my request. During the production of the performances analyzed here, almost all of the people mentioned were students at the ATA. The exception is Anna Oramus, who studied at the Academy of Fine

<sup>2</sup> I have already written about Michał Telega's *Actresses*, or *Sorry for Touching You* from the ATA in Kraków and *The Club*, created by student actresses at the ADA and co-produced with the TR Warszawa – both of which I consider model projects of this kind – and published my findings or submitted them to publishers (Kwaśniewska 2022; Kwaśniewska forthcoming).

Arts and participated in the academic life of the theater school only when preparing exams with students of the Department of Directing. This paper mainly encompasses two perspectives: those of the directors/dramaturges and those of the actors. Because the scope of this text does not allow me to take advantage of the full potential of the materials I have gathered, I do not assume the findings presented here to be definitive. I am going to continue this study in a book that will include testimonies from a larger group of people.

### Artistic research and collective creation

“Artistic research” combines the creative process with cognitive-academic ones. Its objective is to produce and disseminate knowledge gained through creative action involving a hybrid methodology. While formulas of artistic research are varied, I mostly refer to its Polish branch, popularized by Paulina Brelińska-Garsztka, Zofia Małkiewicz-Daszkowska and Zofia Reznik (Brelińska-Garsztka et al. 2022). The art projects I intend to describe here did not utilize this methodology intentionally. However, in their production, they generated knowledge and tools to later be made public in various performances and artistic-academic forms. The creative practices that emerged from these artistic research processes approximated horizontal rather than hierarchical collective creation (Green-Rogers 2016).<sup>3</sup> Still, the creators did not aban-

<sup>3</sup> I suggested a broader definition of devised theater, compiled from various sources, in my article (Kwaśniewska 2022).

don their professional roles; rather, each person co-created the performance by exercising their competencies in their area of responsibility, and drawing conclusions from their position in the theater. This formula gave both the rehearsals and the performances themselves a polyphonic and poly-perspectival character.

### 1. The #Rape of Lucrece

*The #Rape of Lucrece* was made in 2018 as a graduation performance at the Acting Department of the ATA in Kraków. It was directed by Marcin Liber, with dramaturgy by Martyna Wawrzyniak – at the time, a student of the Faculty of Theatre Directing at the ATA, specializing in dramaturgy. The performance, which was originally intended to be an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucretia* confronted with documentary material on the #MeToo movement (Wawrzyniak 2019), became a montage of scenes concerning rape culture. It also discussed the type of theater education that solidifies gender role stereotypes and operates on the basis of a set of crude, sexual norms. The script emerged from the working process, which relied on broad research and acting improvisation. Looking back, creators report that the process turned out to be important both artistically and in terms of their social consciousness.

The dramaturge Martyna Wawrzyniak, who worked on the performance as a student of the Faculty of Theater Directing, wrote an MA thesis entitled „*Gdy tylko zaczynasz pisać, wszystko staje się fikcją*”. *Strate-*

*gie i narzędzia dramaturga – między doświadczeniem a zapisem* [“As soon as you start writing, everything turns into fiction.” Strategies and tools of the dramaturge – between experience and recording], in which she analyzed the dramaturgy of narrating rape in the context of revictimization and emancipation (Wawrzyniak 2019). In one of the chapters, she described her work on *The #Rape of Lucrece*. The unfolding performance became the field in which she studied the #MeToo movement and self-analyzed her own tools and dramaturgical decisions in its context. During a 2022 conversation, she observed that the performance opened her up to discovering and exploring feminist themes in the theater – something that she had previously found embarrassing, partly because it was treated as surprising and unusual at theater school, when she began her studies, that is, between 2013 and 2015.

The questions she posed to herself and other participants in the process were mostly ethical in nature. They concerned approaching the subject and the documentary material used in the performance in an honest and conscientious way. The dramaturgical attitude that Wawrzyniak developed in rehearsals stood contrary to Shakespeare's ornate poem describing the suffering of a raped woman, and to the studied affectations of the actresses who played her. In her writing, Wawrzyniak was actively resisting stereotypical artistic representations of rape (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 12) to later have her intuitions confirmed by feminist literature (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 15). Because she was firmly opposed to staging a rape scene, the director gave her a task of writing

a monologue in which she would express her objections. In this text, she drew on the knowledge she had gained from actors in rehearsals. What emerged was a critical discussion of issues such as the relationship between the actor's and the character's bodies and psyches in scenes of violence, coercing actors into transgression and the sexually charged language used by some teachers at the ATA (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 19).

Shakespeare's legacy became another research problem, particularly due to its role in theater education and his oeuvre's relationship to rape culture. This question gave rise to several more scenes of the performance: the accusatory monologues of a dramaturg. The working process transformed into an autopsy of the legacy of drama and theater, which is acquired non-reflectively by many actors in their education process – even though it can be considered a contribution to rape culture by today's standards.

This problem found its counterpoint in documentary material woven into the structure of the performance: the fragments of an anonymous letter by a rape survivor, which had been published in the media. The necessity to edit the testimony for the script generated the question: "How to work on someone's testimony in terms of dramaturgy?" (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 17) Wawrzyniak feared appropriating someone's voice for a show of acting skill. Her doubts problematized the tension between an ethical position and a theatrical effect (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 18). She later decided that adding the fragments of the personal testimony had been a mis-

take, although she did see the benefits of including an expert's voice for the cast and the audience.

The problem of representation also encompassed the possibility and viability of bringing the #MeToo movement to the stage – because the movement had initially been mostly embedded in the aesthetics and dynamics of the social media (Wawrzyniak 2019, p. 13). Interestingly, in our 2022 conversation, Wawrzyniak decided that the problem of the medium, although it still seems significant, may have been related to her fear caused by the risky nature of the project, one that - on top of this - was critical of the institution legitimizing it. Conquering this fear was an important experience for all the students participating in the process. One issue discussed in rehearsals was what could be said from the stage and how, and what risk was associated with disclosing one's own experiences in the theater. However, according to Wawrzyniak, the team was emboldened by the subject itself, which activated self-analysis and reflection on their own community, as well as by the sense of safety and artistic freedom, which arose among the peers mostly thanks to the director's framing of the working process. Thematising the behaviors which violate boundaries in the education process was only possible due to a working process that did not reproduce such behaviors. Moreover, Wawrzyniak considers it significant that the director had not undergone a public theater education, and so the egalitarian and engaging working methods he suggested to the team had been developed in alternative theater.

While Wawrzyniak's research mostly pertained to the question of representation, the solutions she eventually applied did not only stem from her own beliefs, intuitions and explorations, but also from the knowledge she had gained in her conversations with the cast. Writing the script involved negotiating the optimal versions of stage solutions and content with the entire team, with the assumption that anything that appears in a scene needs to be accepted by the participants of the process, even if compromise is necessary.

For the cast: Emma Giegżno, Melania Grzesiewicz, Emma Herdzik, Natalia Hodurek, Kamila Janik, Katarzyna Nejman, Joanna Pocica, Weronika Warchoń, Dawid Chudy, Mikołaj Kubacki, Patryk Michalak, Mateusz Paluch and Stanisław Twaróg, the working process was an opportunity to rethink or change their attitudes to the #MeToo movement. This resulted from an in-depth research conducted by all the participants. As Melania Grzesiewicz has observed, the confrontations of various perspectives revealed dramatically different points of view (e.g., between male and female actors), but they also facilitated a discussion, giving hope for change. For Weronika Warchoń, this working method led her to initiating her own research project at the ATA. Initially sceptical of public testimonies, Warchoń – inspired by a video she had watched on the Internet – put up a mattress at school with the slogan #MeToo on it, encouraging students to write their own testimonies there. In the performance, she played the woman from the YouTube video, telling her story; but she also spoke up as herself, the actor

Weronika Warchoń, presenting her artifact/document covered in various testimonies.

Warchoń's action was one factor that contributed to the self-referential character of the performance. Katarzyna Nejman, Melania Grzesiewicz and Weronika Warchoń<sup>4</sup> have pointed out that it served as an introduction to a conversation on abuse in the theater, which allowed them to revisit the idea of boundaries in the artistic process. Katarzyna Nejman said:

I currently carry inside me very intense feelings about the final scene of our performance when the whole cast confronted the audience with words we had heard during the five years of our practice. They were the words of young directors, our teachers, our colleagues. I think this was a symbolic reckoning with and a goodbye to these experiences within the four walls in which they had been said. Looking back, I find it very brave. What's interesting is that when we got handed this text by Martyna Wawrzyniak in rehearsal (written based on our conversations and the quotes we would drop), we rebelled against adding it to the performance. "It's too pretentious..." I don't think we wanted to judge anyone with the performance; rather, we wanted to ask questions and possibly be some sort of a mirror. In rehearsals, we often talked about boundaries that can be very thin in theater and at work. Many times, this also raised

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4 I was able to speak to them about the performance and the working process immediately after the premiere because they were in my theater studies class at the Jagiellonian University. In the future, I intend to contact the rest of the cast.

questions about influence, about the possibilities of reacting, about where our boundaries lay and whether we respect them in others. For me, personally, this was the first “bomb” that was dropped concerning the abuse in this community.<sup>5</sup>

The experience is reflected in their attitudes today. For example, Grzesiewicz writes: “In my professional work, I am able to set a boundary and protect myself from becoming a victim of abusive practices. ... Mobbing, body shaming, physical and verbal abuse – all of these things still happen among artists, but they are exceptions, and the tacit acceptance is gone. The acceptance that used to be there when I was beginning my studies”. Weronika Warchoń admitted that working on *The #Rape of Lucrece* enhanced her sense of agency in confrontations with unpleasant, sexist remarks by collaborators.

The model of working on this performance also strengthened their sense of an actor’s creative freedom, agency and safety.

What Marcin [Liber – M.K.] taught me was most of all freedom in theater, but not only that. He gave us the space to make mistakes, to be silly, to not know something, to search, check, speak up, [and] boldly present out ideas.

First and foremost, the path to the final effect itself was pretty unusual. [It was] firmly based on (the actors’) in-

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<sup>5</sup> Here and below: Katarzyna Nejman when asked by me to reminisce on the working process around *The #Rape of Lucrece* and its later implications.

spirations and reflections, but [they were] very wisely guided and gathered together by Marcin Liber. I think that this is quite an unusual combination – and an actor’s dream when they feel like a creator and may fulfil themselves creatively while maintaining a sense of security and a great satisfaction with the subject they broach.

## 2. Othello

*Othello* was created in 2019 as an examination performance at the ATA’s Faculty of Theatre Directing in Remigiusz Brzyk’s class by the student director Wiktor Bagiński and the team: actors Natalia Bielecka, Damian Sosnowski, Alan Al-Murtathem and scenographer Anna Oramus. It emerged from physical exercise, meditation and guided actors’ improvisation in a long but irregular working process after class hours. Bagiński’s idea was to intertwine fiction and reality, which was supposed to bring the audience into a state of uncertainty. The feeling was all the more painful and uncomfortable because the uncertainty surrounded rape. Shakespeare’s play became the point of departure for a work which – impacted by the #MeToo movement among other things – centered around sexual violence. A key scene in this performance was Bielecka’s monologue, which later turned out to be entirely fictional. Sitting very close to the first row, speaking in an authentic, non-theatrical tone and using the real names of her collaborators, she told the audience about a rape supposedly perpetrated on her by her castmate Damian Sosnowski. She also said that the director Wiktor

Bagiński persuaded her to forge the trauma into art (see my description of the performance: Kwaśniewska 2020). The performance provoked reflection on a range of topics: the line between fiction and reality in the theater, the role of trauma and manipulation in the theatrical process, nudity in theater (in one version of the performance, Sosnowski stood naked over Bielecka, reading a reconstructed narrative of the rape), and the reliability of a testimony. The performance was staged twice, in two different versions. They were accompanied by another kind of clandestine and prolonged performative action. Bagiński had asked his team not to reveal to others what was true and what was not – which generated more tension and rumors. This performative action was terminated during the Forum Młodej Reżyserii [Young Directors' Forum] (a prestigious competition of performances by theater direction students from public drama schools), as requested by Bagiński's team, especially by Sosnowski. Bagiński opened the discussion after the show by revealing that anything that just happened on stage was invented.

The aspect of “research and education” in Bagiński's *Othello* is more ambiguous than with other projects analyzed in this text. Despite this fact, I believe that the project did build knowledge on various boundaries in the artistic process. It is significant that Damian Sosnowski wrote about it at length in his MA thesis (Sosnowski 2021), and Wiktor Bagiński is wondering whether to pursue a doctoral project on the themes that *Othello* initiated in his art. Thus, the two performances of *Othello*

did present the findings from one stage of their exploration – but not the final one.

Wiktor Bagiński is – astoundingly – the only Black Polish theater director, who graduated from a public drama school. Blackness and racism have been key themes in his art, often combined with sexual violence. *Othello* set in motion a series of performances on that subject. In his staging of *Black Skin, White Masks* that he worked on almost simultaneously, Bagiński included a scene analogous to Bielecka's monologue. Retrospectively, he is critical of his earlier artistic premises. He believes that, as a Black Pole, he was trying to fulfil the needs of the white audience and of the people who govern institutions, and is considering writing a doctoral thesis about this. Today, he considers it ethically problematic that they manipulated a fictional testimony to sound like the description of the actor's personal experience. In the context of the real experience of sexual abuse by many women, he regards it as a violation, which may have an adverse effect on the dynamics of the rape culture debate. His reflective self-analysis also encompassed the working process around *Othello*, encouraging him to reach out to the actors and ask them about their wellbeing. Bagiński concluded that such risky art projects require psychological supervision. He admits that his focus on the artistic effect reduced his mindfulness of his own and others' safety.

For Natalia Bielecka and Damian Sosnowski, working on *Othello* constituted a significant event in terms of exploring their boundaries and psychological safety in their work as actors as well as regarding the di-

rector's manipulation. Their feelings after the project and their conclusions seem contradictory at times, which is symptomatic of such risky processes and important in thinking about the necessity of individual approaches in constructing safer working models. In *Othello*, consistently with the director's intention, Bielecka and Sosnowski consciously and deliberately explored the formula of performative acting that blurs the boundary between the person and the role. In Bielecka's case, the process was directed outward and did not involve personal identification with a rape victim. She created the character by researching the topic, for example watching documentary materials with testimonies by survivors of sexual abuse. She first tried out her pseudo-documentary acting on the director himself. Following his premise, in one rehearsal, she told him a story of rape as her own. When she realized Bagiński believed her, she admitted to the deception. This way, she was able to test the validity of her intuitions on certain acting tools that she could use to mislead the audience. On the other hand, with Sosnowski, the blurring of the boundaries between himself and the role was directed inward. The actor did not have a clear idea of the boundary between himself as a person and himself as an actor playing himself and Iago. He talks about the role in terms of psychological "breaking", thespian masochism, fear and exploring extreme and dark states of mind. He mentions a sense of guilt for a deed he had never committed, and physical reactions – such as vomiting – related to psychological stress. He interrogates the relationship between "acting out" these states and a real contact

with them in the working process. These reflections seem to demonstrate a destructive impact of this method on an actor's psyche, and to correspond to the popular myth that good art comes from suffering. At the same time, Sosnowski claims that the work on this examination performance provided a good space for making risky choices. He says *Othello* was a pivotal experience in his education as an actor and an important component in the process of self-knowledge, which resulted, for example, in the acceptance of his own body and a better understanding of an actor's function in performative theater. Nonetheless, he would not like to repeat such an experience.

The expansion of performative action outside the framework of a theatrical performance confirmed the efficacy of the acting convention pursued in *Othello*. The decision to conceal the fact that the rape narrative was fictional could not have been in force without the effect of believability in acting. The audience members that treated Bielecka's monologue as genuine (at least in terms of an authentic experience of trauma if not in terms of facts) said that the director's strategy was manipulative. And although Bielecka considers such reactions as patronizing, believing that they deny her agency, both for her and Sosnowski working on *Othello* was vital for exploring the relationship between the actor and the director. Both actors declare that the collaboration proceeded in a good, friendly atmosphere of openness to co-thinking and co-creating. Still, they have different perspectives on working with Bagiński. She noticed some attempts at manipulation, but considered them so osten-

tatious, so overt that they were not a problem. She regarded the whole process as transparent and safe; as a result, she could pursue risky performative gestures. By contrast, Damian Sosnowski believes the process not to have been transparent. In his Master's thesis, he wrote that Bagiński had found a pretext to analyze his actors' private personalities at an early stage, when he had asked them to write internal monologues for characters from Pina Bausch's performances they watched together (Sosnowski 2021, p. 25). Sosnowski also decided that Bagiński had contrived the scene in which he was naked in a manipulative way. The director had not expressed his expectation directly; rather, he had alluded to it at a bar outing, insisting that the scene was incomplete. When the idea to stage the rape emerged in rehearsal, Sosnowski thought back to the suggestion articulated in a personal conversation at the bar, and assumed this was Bagiński's expectation. One should add that although the director declares he never forced the actor to be naked, he admits to expressing opinions that nudity would boost the intensity of the scene.

For Bielecka and Sosnowski, working on *Othello* was a factor that made them more vigilant about directors' manipulations. Consequently, they rejected these types of working methods, even with people considered prominent artists. For Sosnowski, who retrospectively seems to have been more burdened by the process, it was also a lesson in self-care in artistic practice. In this regard, the moment of setting a boundary and making the deci-

sion that it was necessary to publicly disclose the fictional character of the story in the performance was an important experience for Sosnowski.

### 3. Rok pierwszy

*Rok pierwszy* [Year One] was also an examination performance at the Faculty of Theatre Directing at the ATA as an assignment for Michał Borczuch's class in 2021. Although only Zdenka Pszczołowska was graded for it, she co-created the performance in a lasting collaboration involving research, directing and dramaturgy with Maja Wisła-Szopińska, who had been expelled in 2018. Important contributions were made by the cast: Monika Pawlicka, Aleksandra Samelczak, Michał Balicki, Paweł Charyton, Przemysław Przestrzelski, Robert Ciszewski and the production team: Anna Oramus (stage and costume design), Klaudyna Schubert (lighting design), Borys Kunkiewicz (music). The project grew out of the fear of being expelled in the first year of theater direction studies – which used to be called “the selection year”. The performance was autoethnographic in nature: Pszczołowska and Wisła-Szopińska started with their own experiences of fear and expulsion to analyze the problem in a broader context. The performance comprised three parts. In the first part, the audience watched the behavior of students waiting for the assessment of their etudes by the examination board. In the second part, the examination was staged as a television game show. The third part present-

ed some findings of a survey that was conducted for the purposes of the performance.

Out of all the projects analyzed here, the work on *Rok pierwszy* involved academic research in the most overt manner. Preparing for the performance, Zdenka Pszczołowska and Maja Wisła-Szopińska designed two questionnaires on different aspects of studying and teaching in the first year of the FTD. Each contained over 20 questions. In addition, the creators also conducted a number of individual interviews with people studying at the FTD. The authors began their study with a diagnosis that certain factors chronically heighten the stress, tension and uncertainty that accompany the education of student directors and dramaturges. But the questionnaire replies exceeded their imagination, indicating a lasting, systemic problem. This was crucial because the debate on abuse in theater schools in Poland (and especially in the Kraków one ) was underpinned by the conviction that the problem mostly affected acting departments. Moreover, their research revealed that the anti-violence and anti-discrimination action that had been undertaken two years earlier at the ATA was insufficient. It should be stressed that the authors of the survey did not only focus on negative experiences, and designed the questions around emotions, impressions and subjective judgements. This allowed them to highlight the nuances of the subject and the ambiguities of situations: the same people and situations that some considered abusive were regarded as helpful by others.

The results of the survey were then deepened by the next stage of the research, namely the directors' inter-

views with students. They found it especially puzzling that people who – as far as Pszczołowska and Wisła-Szopińska knew – had considerable problems in their first year, often downplayed their emotions and did not speak critically of the school. Still, such attitudes were in the minority. Usually, the conversations – albeit challenging – were therapeutic: they created a platform to safely share difficult but similar experiences and emotions. They made it possible to view individual experiences as part of a bigger picture.

The findings were further deepened during the production process in confrontations with a more diverse group of people and explorations of other aspects of relationships at the school. The production team was assembled based on their earlier interpersonal connections and established trust, which fostered a sense of safety, openness to debate and readiness for artistic risk. The script emerged gradually as a result of a close collaboration within the team. The first part unfolded out of improvisation, which was relatively free but situationally framed by Pszczołowska and Wisła-Szopińska. In these improvised scenes student actors played student directors, thus revealing their beliefs about them. This also confirmed the existence of identity performances for different theatrical professions – a diagnosis that had been put forward several years earlier by director Weronika Szczawińska, who was engaged in Polish theater transformations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These scenes confirmed Szczawińska's earlier observation: "Polish theatre is about fetishising one's position, one's profession, in the arts factory that works hard and for the market. It's a mechanism I remember very well from drama school. We used to construct roles: how to be a director, an actress, a critic. A particular code was associated with it – an outfit, a mode of behaviour, and first of all a demonstration of contempt for other theatrical professions" (Szczawińska 2017).

Pszczółowska was the only person who played themselves. She was able to transcend the role of a director to combine it with the role of a performer because Wisła-Szopińska could provide notes as her co-director.

As a result of the teamwork and the sense of mutual trust, new, unintended findings surfaced alongside the intended ones. As the rehearsals drew to a close, the actors expressed their disappointment with the fact that they had not been asked to fill in the questionnaires. Because there was no time to rectify this omission, the complaint was included in the performance as part of a closing speech by Michał Balicki. He said that collaborating on examination performances with student directors of the FTD was an important experience for student actors despite it not being explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. He emphasized that the actors were also routinely affected by unpleasant remarks made by examination boards. Pszczółowska commented that while she felt embarrassed by having forgotten about the actors in her survey, it was a symptomatic fact pointing to their unwitting marginalization, which reproduced the directorial practices prevalent in the school.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the first part of the performance revealed the stereotypes of directors as seen by actors, the final one-confirmed (by omitting them in the survey) but overcame (by including the complaint) a stereotype of actors “who are there to act, not give their opinions”.

<sup>7</sup> “I was told that I was drawing too much from the actors and that it was wrong to be so interested in what they had to say or suggest because it looked as if I didn't have my own idea” (Morawski, Wisła-Szopa 2021).

The emotions stirred within the director throughout the creative process turned out to be another area of research. Pszczółowska was risking the most: it was her examination; she was a third-year student; she decided to collaborate with someone who had been expelled based on assessments by her teachers; and the results of most questionnaires whose randomly selected fragments were to be presented during the performance were critical of the school, with some specifically naming certain teachers. Thus, although Pszczółowska now looks back on some of these fears as absurd, they remain completely understandable. The tension was heightened by the air of anxiety surrounding her production process, about which she was told by her classmates. Today, she believes that none of these emotions would have arisen if no one had been aware of the existing problems. Despite her fears, she did not resort to self-censorship. She was emboldened by a sense of the importance of the subject that she shared with her supportive teacher and her team, and the possibility to broadly and profoundly analyze any decision with them. The performance was well-received, and its evaluation by the examination board was exemplary. Bringing the problem to light mitigated it to some extent.

The answers to the questionnaire were partially presented in the third part of the performance when the actors, standing in a row, drew pieces of paper with replies written on them out of jars they were holding and read them out loud. The filled-in questionnaires were also made available in their entirety to the audience during the examination performance; however, because it took place

during the pandemic, only a limited number of people could see them. Pszczołowska and Wisła-Szopińska also talked about their survey in a published interview with Piotr Morawski (Morawski, Wisła-Szopa 2021). They are planning to process and publish their findings – but it would require a great deal of unpaid work and the acquisition of new skills. Although the ATA approved the survey, it did not offer institutional support in processing its results. The institution could prove immensely helpful in solving some problems both among the teachers and the students, and improve the communication between them. This sort of institutional attitude is the polar opposite of what the ADA does in Warsaw, not only encouraging students to write their own expert's statements (like the actors who produced the performance *The Club* in 2021), but also commissioning specialist academic research on school premises.

### **“I studied acting at the Faculty of Theater Direction”**

All the creative processes discussed above explored the problem of abuse in creation and education from many points of view. While the exploration took on different forms, it was always characterized by personal involvement in the subject and entailed risks – which the students were able to take with the help of competent pedagogical supervision, a sense of importance of the subject and trust between creators. Close and egalitarian collaboration between student directors and student actors was

key. Such collaboration is not provided for in curricula. The student directors' examination performances meant unpaid work after class for the student actors, and “an opportunity” given to a dramaturg working on her degree. Nevertheless, thanks to the collaborative action, the performances developed through collective creation where different perspectives met and were negotiated. This necessitated a flattened director-actor and student-teacher hierarchy with the concurrent maintenance of functions, competencies and responsibilities (including the framing of the creative process by the leaders). Similar collaborations undoubtedly form during the production of other examination performances in schools. However, the self-referential character of the works discussed here specifically encouraged the people involved to self-analyze and rethink their own tools, positions and working methods, which impacted their later practices (albeit to varying degrees).

Translated by Aleksandra Paszkowska

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From Master-pupil  
to ignorant  
stagemastering:

Implications of  
power-oriented  
artistic education  
in the process  
of theatre making

*Agnieszka  
Jakimiak*

In 2011, after two years of studies at the Institute of Polish Culture at Warsaw University, as a freshly appointed student of Theatre Directing Department, I entered the building of the Theatre Academy in Krakow. I expected to find myself in a structure resembling my previous studying experience. In the Institute of Polish Culture, I was used to a system in which the act of teaching was understood as a Buberian process of establishing a dialogue between professors and scholars, where both sides constitute themselves by participating in their encounter. I perceived exams, tests and seminars at the Institute as a realm where acquiring knowledge was equally important to challenging pre-existing presumptions – our priority as students was not to learn facts, but to transmit our singular perspective through creating our own narratives based on theories and practical approaches we got to absorb. Then, we were confronting these presumptions with our teachers, who would rarely dismiss our convictions or judge them as misguided. The majority of professors at the Institute were genuinely interested in the singularity of reading anthropology proposed by a student and in challenging existing preconceptions through the lens of the next generation of cultural workers.

Much to my surprise, the Theatre Academy in Krakow was ruled according to a set of drastically different principles than the ones I got acquainted with at the Institute of Polish Culture. Two main departments – Acting and Directing – were placed in one building and filled with students who were blinded by joy that, after beating the competition, were chosen to study at these exclusive

faculties. The temporary feeling of triumph was all that was common for these two groups. The Directing Department consisted mainly of students with previous academic experience, who often applied to the Theatre Academy several times, but were usually aware that working in theatre was one of their options, not the only possible career choice. On the contrary, the Acting Department was filled with people who were younger, very often lacked previous scholarly experience and knew that it was all or nothing: unless they get accepted before they are 24 or 25, big dreams of reaching the acting stardom were over.

I quickly realised that despite the proclaimed atmosphere of creativity and artistic freedom, the general spirit at the Theatre Academy was rather competitive and authority oriented. Today I would even describe it as highly patriarchal. Very soon I found out that during their stay at the Theatre Academy, students of the Acting Department were often isolated from information on their learning process or their progress, which – compared to the transparency of the Institute of Polish Culture – struck me as almost unbelievable. Their time of studies was therefore full of tension and uncertainty. What is more, their position was in constant jeopardy, as at the end of the first and second (and sometimes even third) school year, behind closed doors, the academic board decided whether each student proved to be fit for the acting profession and could stay at the Academy. In our department, we were also urged to accept the sway of authority. As future directors and dramaturgs we were repeatedly encouraged to forget our interpreting habits that we

learned at different departments at various universities, and to rely exclusively on the expertise of the professor, who taught a certain course.

In this article I am going to highlight how these dynamics affected the distribution of power within the broad realm of contemporary theatre production in Poland. In the first part, I am going to focus on the challenges that I recognised to be a result of a very hierarchical and often non-inclusive methodology applied at the Theatre Academy. I will scrutinise how the master-oriented structure contributed to creating an atmosphere of distrust within many rehearsal rooms, and made it almost impossible to question and reshape the theatre system that has been founded on dominance of a leader-figure. In the second part, I will address the issues raised by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) in order to project a possible way out of the authority-based teaching system. By referring to the notion of translating or rewriting the knowledge (that – according to Rancière – does not reinforce the hierarchical dynamics that the act of giving explanations does), I would like to discuss an alternative model of introducing theatre practice to students of artistic academies. The proposed model follows Rancière's reading of Jacotot, who put in question the “misleadingly self-evident equation between authority and knowledge” (Citton). I argue that the widely-discussed concept of the “ignorant schoolmaster” has potentially fascinating implications when applied in theatre making – a discipline which is characterised by oscillating between shifting ideas, strongly influenced by the current socio-political context and being in constant motion.

## Against the familiar structure of masters

In 2013, together with the theatre scholar and cultural worker Joanna Wichowska and the theatre curator Goran Injac, I began working as a dramaturg with the Croatian theatre director Oliver Frljić, who was commissioned to stage *Un-Divine Comedy* by Zygmunt Krasiński at the National Sary Theatre in Krakow. At that time, I had been studying at the Theatre Academy for two years and working as a playwright and dramaturg in theatres in various Polish cities. The performance Frljić was invited to direct was my fourth job at the National Sary Theatre in Krakow, a well-established and prestigious institution that was known to cherish its long theatrical tradition and to be a cradle of major theatre authors in Poland (such as Konrad Swinarski or Krystian Lupa). However, this work remained the first one that reshaped and reinvented my understanding of how the academic distribution of knowledge and power influenced the structure of repertoire theatres.

Our premiere of *Un-Divine Comedy*. Remains was suspended, and no one ever saw the outcome of 6,5 weeks of work, but the institutional consequences of the process initiated in the Polish theatre by Frljić remained extremely visible and apparent for many years. The controversy that finally led to the cancellation of the show by the then artistic manager of the Sary Theatre, Jan Klata, was connected to the topic of the unfinished production (it was focused on the Polish anti-Semitism, and a blind spot of the Polish citizens, who were implicated in the

genocide of the Jews during the World War II), and to the method of working proposed by Frljić. The Croatian director came to Krakow with a set of political tools he would put at the actors' disposal and with a (deliberate) lack of prior knowledge concerning the multi-layered network of prejudices, biases and troubled relationships that characterised the Polish society and its liaisons with other ethnic groups. This realm of information became something he wanted to obtain in the process of rehearsing, by talking to people involved in the project, and cultural workers invited by the dramaturgical team to broaden the context. Therefore, instead of imposing a narrative on a certain group, Frljić aimed at listening to a story this group tells about themselves and reacting to it in a performative way.

According to Frljić, theatre – an element of the public sphere – is a political arena that can be occupied with potentially transformative ideas. In most of the performances these ideas come from a director or a playwright, whose ideology is imposed on actors that transmit someone else's voice. In that way, theatre cannot become truly emancipatory as a medium, as the speaking subject is expected to formulate and often agree with concepts that are neither a result of their own consideration nor remain in accordance with their standpoints. This type of incapacitation is rooted already in the teaching methodology applied in theatre academies (that – as it turned out – did not differ in Zagreb and Krakow), which was based on the assumption, as Frljić put it, “that students of the directing department should learn how to manipulate ac-

tors and students of acting department should recognise directors' manipulations and manipulate them instead."

10 years ago, emancipatory discourse on the theatrical process of production was far from being widespread or even present in Poland. Institutional critique was relatively new and most of the works dedicated to alternative modes of cooperation not based on the authority of a singular artist were rather unknown. Works of theatre collectives or groups such as Needcompany, The Wooster Group or Forced Entertainment constituted a point of reference for students of theatre directing and festival goers, but they were not taken into account as a possible mode of cooperation. It was the outcome and the performance that were considered to be inspiring by theatre makers, not the process of production. The mere idea that the stage presence of professional actors did not have to rely on creating a character in a given play, and could be derived from their own personal experiences and opinions was highly uncommon in repertoire theatres. In my view, both narrowing the practice of actors to performing foreign texts and marginalising their own lived experience were also rooted in the teaching method employed at the Theatre Academy. Students of acting were taught by other actors who rarely referred to other practices than staging a classical or more contemporary play, and their methods were based on handing over the so-called "craft", not necessarily on bringing out an individual approach towards the staged material.

I have identified three strategies applied by professors of the Theatre Academy that translated from class-

room to rehearsal room and contributed to creating systemic inequality and imbalance in the theatre structure. These strategies belong to manipulative techniques, but in my understanding they exceed a personal approach, as they are grounded in the power structure of theatre academy, and strongly supported by it. I am far from claiming that it was only the individual predisposition of teachers that created the power dynamic that founded an oppressive academic apparatus. I argue that a highly hierarchical and uneven system and a personal willingness to take the top position within it were interconnected, and, as much as some people benefited from being in a position of power, others were often unconscious about the harmful effects of the systemic discrepancies between teachers and students. The most damaging mechanisms I identified in the process of studying at the Academy and rehearsing for *Un-Divine Comedy*. Remains were:

- keeping students in the dark about the assessment criteria (the procedure I have described above),
- perceiving members of the academic community as a family,
- creating a structure that relies on masters and their unquestionable authority

At the Theatre Academy the studying and teaching community was often described as a family. Even recently, on the website of the Theatre Academy in Krakow, the Academy President Dorota Segda thanked the retiring chancellor for his work and underlined that he "became a member of Our Family forever" after years of "treating

his co-workers as members of his own family”. As a student of the Institute of Polish Culture or Royal Holloway, University of London, I never heard school representatives describing the academic structure as a family. I understand that the family comparison was often used to underline the closeness of the bonds created at the Academy, however, I consider it to be a tool that reinforces the patriarchal structure of the school. Such a comparison has far-reaching consequences and implications, as the studying environment itself does not resemble a family: students and teachers usually are not related to each other, students’ upbringings were not influenced by the teachers’ influence, and in the face of a conflict or dissatisfaction with someone’s performance at the academy, the relation between a student and a teacher can be brought to a definite end. Encouraging professors to treat students and co-workers as family members is also entangled in the whole spectrum of understanding what a family is. Among many associations this term evokes, there is the patriarchal understanding of a family – which is the most prominent model in Poland, where the father figure remains the most powerful instance of control and authority. Additionally, as much as it is difficult to assess an exact number of acts of domestic violence, The Polish Nationwide Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence report allows us to assume that it is constantly growing since 2013. Therefore, claiming publicly that the family is an intrinsic source of good, love and support is at least misguided. I understand that in the act of comparing the Theatre Academy to a family, these are not the statistics

and analytic facts that play the most significant part. It is about creating an affiliation that goes beyond professional relationships, is difficult to measure and therefore grants one agent an almost unlimited power over the other.

Another tool that reinforced systemic imbalance was creating a master-oriented structure. When I started studying, each group of students at the Acting Department had its own tutor, whose official function was named “A Group’s Master”. Established actors who were working at this position had control over the general artistic direction of the group they were teaching (they chose plays that were staged at the end of the semester and decided upon the program of studies), and influenced the students with their acting technique. Students of acting were not taught by theatre directors, and they had limited access to theatre studies – they had only one class dedicated to theory per year. Therefore, their main point of reference remained the method of acting proposed by the “Master” and other professors.

I witnessed how the family parallel and creating a master-oriented system were translated to the institutional structure of the Sary Theatre, where many actors from the ensemble were also professors at the Academy. During the rehearsals for *Un-Divine Comedy. Remains.* we tackled the heritage of Konrad Swinarski, Polish theatre director who died in 1975. Several actors from the group played in his legendary performances, such as *Dziady (Forefathers’ Eve)* in 1973) or *Nie-boska komedia (Un-Divine Comedy)* in 1966). Frljić was focused on tracing Polish anti-Semitism back to the 1950s and 1960s – the post-war

era when Polish society was heavily affected by the damage, and at the same time troubled by recognising its own implication in creating the anti-Semitic bias and facing its consequences. *Un-Divine Comedy* has been described as a work that contains anti-Semitic prejudice. The Polish literary critic Maria Janion described *Un-Divine Comedy* as a ‘masterpiece flawed by anti-Semitism’ (Janion 2009), and already in 1970 she drew attention to the ideological mindset that accompanied Krasiński. Janion pointed out that there may be no disambiguation concerning the ideology that influenced and coincided with Krasiński’s writing:

Krasiński’s anti-Semitism was nourished already in his childhood and early youth. General Wincenty Krasiński was publishing anti-Semitic comments in *On Jews in Poland*. His private tutor was Alojzy Chiarini, a retired professor of Eastern languages and the history of Catholic Church at Warsaw University. Chiarini was instilling his young ‘loving scholar’ with ideas about the calamitous role of Marranos [Spanish and Portuguese Jews]. (Janion 1970: 134)

According to Janion, the catastrophic perspective depicted by Krasiński was deeply rooted in his conviction that Jews represent ‘a destructive and subversive force that aims at undermining the Christian order and inspires all revolutions’ (1970: 133). According to Krasiński, revolutionary movements were inherently evil and fatal. Janion does not question the significance and influence of *Un-Divine Comedy* as a literary document of a certain

era; neither does she diminish its artistic potential. However, in the light of her recognition it would be difficult to omit the most problematic aspect of Krasiński’s work in a staged adaptation.

When we confronted the actors who participated in Swinarski’s productions with a query concerning the anti-Semitism of *Un-Divine* and Swinarski’s staging, the discussion was quickly overshadowed by highly emotional tone of those actors who claimed that even posing a question concerning potential anti-Semitic content of “their master’s work” was improper, unjust and absurd. Their argumentation did not relate to the content of the play nor the staging. It relied on the conviction that “such a loving and honest director” as Swinarski could never produce an antisemitic message in his work.

At that point I understood how disturbing and dangerous the model of idolising “a master” was – it eventually led to diminishing individual responsibility, blurring political awareness and enforcing a hierarchical structure, in which only those in power are creating the ideological realm. Others, who are in an inferior position, do not feel that they are required to contribute to the ideological mindset, and bear no political liability for the message they create. What is more, they may often be completely unaware what idea they support by participating in a certain project. At that point of our work on *Un-Divine Comedy*, the most crucial question was not whether Swinarski’s staging carried anti-Semitic traits, but whether actors who were raised in the master-oriented system were able to break the cycle and take

responsibility for the content they create on stage, and question the power of the director by introducing their own political agenda.

### **Ignorant stagemasters**

The process of working on *Un-divine* was abruptly stopped due to the intervention of the former manager of the Sary Theatre Jan Klata, who firstly suspended the production and finally called it off. Nevertheless, the process initiated by Frljić went beyond staging a performance and opened a field for a debate on institutional critique and the social and political implications of theatre. Thanks to Agata Adamiecka, who was working at that time in the Theatre Institute in Warsaw and organised a panel discussion dedicated to the cancelled production, and to the editorial board of “Didaskalia” magazine that decided to publish statements and articles by members of the *Un-Divine* team shortly after the cancellation, both the process of rehearsing and the emancipatory approach towards performing represented by Frljić were broadly described, discussed and scrutinised.

In my theatre practice, the tools given by Frljić opened a new realm for reshaping the conventional theatre structure in which the director imposes their point of view on the ensemble and co-creators. In describing the process of reinventing the dynamic in the rehearsal room, I will refer to Jacques Rancière’s idea of “an ignorant schoolmaster” to illustrate my proposal on how to reinvent the relationship between the director and the

performers within the realm of repertoire theatre. I perceive this platform as a prolongation of a classroom, especially the one I encountered while studying at the Theatre Academy in Krakow. I firmly believe that in both cases, i.e., in the academic and in the rehearsing framework, the inequality between agents involved in the creative process can be revisited and overcome.

In 1987 Jacques Rancière published *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*: his reflection upon an experience of Joseph Jacotot who in the first half of the nineteenth century worked as a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain in the Netherlands. His students did not speak French and he was unfamiliar with Flemish, therefore he decided to conduct an experiment: he gave the students a bilingual edition of *Telèmaque* by Fènèlon, and asked them to read the original version with the help of the translation. According to Jacotot, in this way students quickly mastered not only the reading skill in French but were soon able to write essays in the foreign language. Jacotot did not teach them a new language – he facilitated their process of learning. Jacotot’s experiment inspired Rancière to rewrite pedagogical theory in a provocative and revolutionary way. At the very beginning of his essay, following Jacotot’s thought, the French philosopher makes two assumptions: a) the act of explaining is not crucial for the process of learning, “understanding is never more than translating, that is, giving an equivalent of a text, but in no way its reason” (p. 9); b) there is no inferior and supe-

rior intelligence, people are born with equal intelligence. Or, as the French philosopher Yves Citton puts it:

[Rancière's] close reading of Jacotot revealed that "the ignorant person" is never defined as such by a mere lack of knowledge, but by an oppressive structure that transforms a perfectly able intellectual agent into a powerless recipient (supposed passively to absorb forms of knowledge produced for him, but never by him) - an oppressive structure that is perverse enough to masquerade its very production of "the ignorant person" as a remedy against ignorance! [Citton, p.30]

Following Rancière's recognition, I perceive the procedure of rehearsing for a performance as a process of learning. The difference between the academic way of obtaining knowledge and doing it in the rehearsal room relies on the distribution of roles. While in the academy, the roles of students and professors are distributed and defined in advance, in the repertoire theatre these parts are not set, however, they remain in a power relation. It is the director who is expected to have a higher understanding of the bigger picture, and who is allowed to share his viewpoint with the outside (audience, critics, public opinion). Nevertheless, if we look at the process of theatre production as a course during which the knowledge is being constantly exchanged between (equal) participants, the pre-set dynamic of director "explaining" the idea to the actors becomes disrupted.

In order to introduce the system of mutual learning to the rehearsal room, one should resign from supporting the notion of authority in every possible way. Following Rancière, I argue that in rehearsalrooms of repertoire theatres in Poland and in the classroom of the Theatre Academy in Krakow, knowledge and authority are not interdependent. For now, the process of education at the Academy has been based on the presumption that students do not have the knowledge concerning how to act, direct or write for stage, and need to be taught by an authority. This pattern is then translated to the process of theatre production, where an authority in directing teaches actors what to think and how to speak in order to transmit the idea of the theatre maker. If only we undermine the necessity of referring to an authority in the stage context, we are left with a structure that relies on exchanging a wide range of various experiences by people who share similar positions.

My personal experience suggests that opening a realm for interchanging knowledge, and approaching the theatre work as a field which is constantly rewritten by agents who create it throughout the process of production, can lead to a fascinating outcome. In that way, all the people engaged in the production can identify with the effect and do not treat the final work as foreign or separated from their artistic sensitivity or ideological standpoint. What is more, having the voices of actors incorporated into the script and contributing to creating the final score, underlines the crucial aspect of theatre work: its community dimension. I claim that by introducing an "ignorant stage mastering" that is founded on translating one set

of knowledge into another, the initial disparity between different agents engaged in the artistic process may be discontinued and replaced by a model of creating a common political platform within the contemporary artfield.

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On Teaching,  
and Learning:

Extracts From  
an Everyday  
Seminar Life

*Sheila  
Ragunathan*

In a seminar for political science, together with around 30 students taking part in the course, we are sitting in a U-shape in order to be able to talk more easily. Attendance isn't compulsory, which is why often only half of the seminar participants are present in the weekly sessions. Normally, this seminar on *Politische Bildung und Diskriminierung im Bildungskontext*, which can be translated with, "political education and discrimination in educational context", is attended by 60 students on paper—a "smaller" seminar group should come as a welcome change for the participants.

In two consecutive seminar sessions, we hear impulse presentations from people who are going to work as teachers, talks on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes", and an excerpt from Christine Riegel's book *Bildung—Intersektionalität—Othering*, which can be translated as *Education—Intersectionality—Othering*. From the texts we learn about the entanglement of feminist discourses with colonial discourses, and about how education is involved in contradictory ways in power and dominance relations. Some of the students hear about these contexts for the first time. This is what can be deduced from the raised eyebrows and frowning faces during the seminar discussion. Other students communicate that they feel carried along by what the texts contain, as they find things that they, too, already have thought about. Both presentation groups rush through the summary of the texts in order to switch into the part of the presentations that is dedicated to applying what has been learned. Connecting with Talpade Mohanty's analy-

sis, one presentation group thinks that they want to clarify how women live in the Global South. “In order to reduce prejudice”, they say. They show images that depict women from different countries in the Global South, and they put forward different “modern” ways in which headscarfs are worn by those women. Upon an objection from another student - who says that these illustrations depict the women of the respective countries in a homogenized manner - silence ensues. In order to activate the participants for Riegel’s text, the other presentation group would like to bring a video that can depict, to the participants, what a racist situation can look like. The video shows a white teacher in the act of insulting a group of racialized youth in the classroom. “This video depicts an overstated version of racism”, the group stress, “nevertheless it would help to watch the video to understand racist actions because we haven’t been able to experience racism so far, in the villages surrounding Frankfurt.” Some of the seminar participants agree while others are unable to come around to what has just been proposed. I can feel a tension in the room, and I see that the majority of the participants watch me with some expectation. I have interrupted both presentations – I am the seminar teacher.

The force behind this desire to talk about the otherness of racialized subjects in my everyday seminar life astonishes me time and time again. This preference finds its expression especially in seminars which tackle topics such as governance structures, and power relations, from a feminist-postcolonial perspective, and which want research critical modes to understand societies. The em-

phasis on otherness mostly isn’t put into place in order to think in relative terms about the existence of the addressed subjects, or, which would be worse, to discriminate against them, but more in order to be able to describe certain markers, actions, or ways of life, of racialized *communities*\*.

Embedded in a desire for truth, universality, and scholarliness, the need to identify, to name, and to compare the being-different of certain subjects increasingly conflicts with my own subversive attempts to deconstruct well-known notions in seminar discussions, and to draw attention back to the texts themselves. But as the texts I have selected often call on their readers to rethink normative constructions, and to rethink the supposedly binary relationship of ‘known’ and ‘unknown’, ‘own’ and ‘foreign’, and ‘norm’ and ‘deviation’, these attempts mostly meet some skilful evasion—presumably because dealing with what is already familiar usually seems to be more difficult. I could observe a kind of resistance that comes into play when dealing with texts that, from a historical perspective, attempt to uncover imperialist and epistemic structures of violence, and in my opinion, this resistance speaks of how successful academic teaching and learning contexts are in (continuously) covering up the role of scholarly disciplines in the context of colonial power systems.

The focus of the first presentation group illustrates how we have learned to maintain a colonial discourse about the “other woman”. Instead of dealing with Talpade Mohanty’s analysis of the image of the “Third World woman” as a unified subject in Western feminist

texts, and instead of elaborating on the critique of unified representations of women in the Global South, the presentation group takes a different path, and uses arguments that are similar to those of the scholars in the texts that Talpade Mohanty seeks to expose. The presentation group is looking for true-to-life examples, and they find themselves, with the description of racialized subjects in relation to “what we are used to”, on the terrain of self-representation, and representation by others. By analyzing the colonial gesture in Western feminist texts, *Under Western Eyes* advocates against a methodical universalism, and pleads for a differentiated view of the situation of all women. In a similar manner, the second presentation group, by addressing racism in the educational context, prefers to show a video depicting an “exaggerated” racist situation in order to focus on the racialized subject, and to observe them in their experiences, instead of thinking together about how racist structures of domination are inscribed in educational institutions, and how such structures try to lock them in the position of the “others”. Why do racialized subjects have to be brought into victim positions in order for others to be able to identify and name racist structures of domination? Which status is given to stories of pain and violence in recognizing and addressing racism?

In my search for a way of dealing with what was said and not said by the presentation group, I remember the beginning of my examination of postcolonial literature, postcolonial theories, and the postcolonial as an effective power: I try to find words for my emotions, to put

together a productive sentence from my anger, desperation, and speechlessness, knowing full well that the irritation itself is part of an important process. I see myself as the one responsible to express the different levels of my irritation in order to do justice to those in the room who become targets of epistemic violence, and who have not expressed their physical tension with words yet—at the same time, I remember to stand back and listen when expression is found for this form of tension. In this context, I am thinking about the fact that, as the one responsible for the seminar, I decided for impulse presentations because I have to coordinate a group of 60 students on my own, thus hoping for some time relief as a part-time employee. Now, I’m annoyed about the “cleaning work” that I have to do after the presentations—maybe I could have avoided this if I had introduced the text myself. I think it would be worth talking about it with other teachers who experience the same conflicts, and I correct my thoughts at the same moment as I remember that my colleagues in academic mid-level status are already too overburdened anyway. In addition, if we sometimes manage to exchange ideas, and to set up our own guidelines in order to be able to structure our seminars better, I am noticing time and time again that I am one of the few teachers of color.

For me, postcolonial education in this context means continuously questioning and dissecting dominant discourses by (re)learning in which ways colonial continuities are (re)produced through the production and transfer of knowledge, as well as through certain practices. This means to draw attention to tension re-

lations within the seminar on the one hand, and to put together concrete counter-proposals on the other hand. Postcolonial education must simultaneously mean uncovering the material consequences of these discourses in a global context, and identifying the contradictory position of a self within them.

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Part — II

Gender, sexuality  
and intimacy  
coordination

Towards a new  
model of work.  
A conversation  
with the actresses  
playing in *The Club*

*Agata Adamiecka-Sitek,  
Julia Biesiada, Julia Borkowska,  
Maria Kozłowska, Katarzyna Lis,  
Adrianna Malecka, Magdalena  
Sildatk, Bernadetta Statkiewicz,  
Monika Szufladowicz, Helena  
Urbańska and Emilia Walus,  
Weronika Szczawińska,  
Roman Pawłowski*

Roman Pawłowski: Good evening at TR Warsaw. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to a meeting with the actresses and creators of the play *The Club*, which is a co-production of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw and the TR Warszawa. I will be leading the discussion together with Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, ombudsman for students' rights at the Theatre Academy. Let me start by introducing the participants. Please welcome the actresses of the play *The Club*: Julia Biesiada, Julia Borkowska, Maria Kozłowska, Katarzyna Lis, Adrianna Malecka, Magdalena Sildatk, Bernadetta Statkiewicz, Monika Szufladowicz, Helena Urbańska and Emilia Walus. Also with us are the creators: the show's director Weronika Szczawińska, the author of the music Teoniki Rożynek, and the director's assistant Marta Szłasa-Rokicka. To this line-up we must also add the absent Dobrawa Borkala, co-author of the stage concept, who also works on the project as a therapeutic and breathwork consultant, and Marta Szypulska, responsible for the space and costumes. This is the entire, all-female team of *The Club*.

Let's start by asking about the origins of this project. What was the need for this performance? I know that it was not created within the standard procedures of the Academy as an acting final exam. It was a grassroots student initiative. Please tell us why you were determined to make

an additional performance alongside your very intensive work on your diploma performances.

Bernadetta Statkiewicz: Maybe it's worth starting with how we felt at a certain point in our studies, when we started working on our diplomas – because the impulse to act came from that feeling. There was a moment when we got together and collectively came to the conclusion that we all felt that something was very wrong with our experience of studying. It was the frustration of not having the chance so far in our acting work to say what was important to us. We also felt that we didn't have the same opportunities to develop as our fellow male students. We were not able to show our skills on an equal footing with them and face equally important challenges. There was a very clear disparity in what they could play and what they could express through their roles, and what we had to play. Our roles were companion roles, secondary roles, lacking autonomy – wives, sisters, mothers, lovers, servants... We felt that we had no voice of our own, that we were not working on the texts that gave us our voice.

Roman Pawłowski: The male students had more proposals and more important roles?

Bernadetta Statkiewicz: Yes, there were very clear disparities, especially in the first diploma. And it's not just about differences in the amount of text, but also about the importance of the issues.

If our colleagues were talking about God, politics, love, their emotions – and we were talking about not having anything to wear, it was a serious problem for us.

Helena Urbańska: This very frustrating sense of disparity not only accompanied us when we were working on our graduation projects. We actually struggled with it throughout our studies. At some point, we felt we couldn't accept it. That's why we started looking for an opportunity to create our own project that would give us a voice and allow us to feel recognition.

Adrianna Malecka: The problem actually arises at the very beginning. There are a lot of women enrolling at the school, many more than men, but for the following years there are usually more male than female students. We've heard from the beginning that it's better this way, because women in theatre don't have as many important roles to play as men anyway. That's the way it was, is and will be in future... Well, no, we didn't want to accept that. We wanted to work with a female director, because all the directors of our diploma performances are men, on a female text that would talk about things that are important to us. It's amazing that now we are here, on the stage of one of the most important theatres in Warsaw, talking to you! A great many people helped us and made it possible for our disagreement to turn into something so very constructive.

Roman Pawłowski: As I understand, the project came from a strong need to empower you as female student-actors, to have your own voice. I'd also like to ask you about the context in which your project came into being, because the Theatre Academy in Warsaw has for some time been carrying out very important activities – that are visible in our community, to increase the safety of students and to counteract discrimination and violence. It can be said that a systemic, structural change has been underway for several years in response to cases of violence and abuse by lecturers revealed in the media. That's why I wanted to ask Agata Adamiecka-Sitek about this process, and how it relates to the performance *The Club*.

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek: I've been the Student Ombudsperson at the Academy for three years now, and before I took on this position, I first participated in the process that led to the creation of this function and the adoption of the Code of Ethics at the Academy. Both of these things were new to the Polish public theatre school system; previously, there were no solutions in place for the safety of students. How did these changes come about? First, there was a specific case related to violence in the Directing Department publicised by the press in 2018. At that time, an extremely important alliance took place: female graduates of our Academy supported the students

and said publicly that they too had experienced violence from the same professor that the situation had been going on for many, many years and had been tolerated by successive authorities of the Academy. Rector Wojciech Malajkat took the matter seriously and began a series of discussions with students and graduates, as a result of which it became clear that the problem was systemic and required a serious, long-term, systemic reform. This was a special moment: grassroots student resistance supported by the theatre community was met with a very serious response from the authorities. In such circumstances, real transformative potential arises, the community matures to change the rules that govern it – those enshrined in bylaws and codes, and the customary ones perpetuated by overwhelming tradition. Thus, we've embarked on a series of changes on many levels, from the creation of appropriate procedures, to training and workshops on prevention of violence and discrimination for the entire community, to commissioning in-depth sociological research to objectify the forms of violence and boundary violations that take place in the Academy, diagnose their causes and make recommendations for change. This is a very complex and intensive process.

The initiative of the fourth-year acting students, who rebelled against the structural gender discrimination they experienced during their train-

ing process, was perfectly in line with this process already taking place at our Academy. When the students came to me and told me what they wanted to do and why, I immediately understood that it was an important initiative that I wanted to support with all my might, because it would give new energy to the changes we were making. And so it happened. Girls, you came to me just over a year ago, and it was like a different era for our university, so much is changing! Before we started working on the project itself, I asked you to describe your experiences at Academy that you found difficult or violating. This is how we came up with a very important document, which we called *The Diagnosis*. Will you tell us about it?

Julia Biesiada: Let me add the story of our meeting, because it shows a lot itself. We didn't know at all that there was a student ombudsperson at our school. We may have heard something about the changes, but we were mainly absorbed in our extremely intensive classes, and were not aware that such reforms were being undertaken, and perhaps we didn't believe that anything serious could change at our school, so we didn't get involved. We sought help outside the school; we talked to the much involved, feminist-minded director Anna Smolar, because we hoped she would be willing to work with us. And it was she who sent us to Agata. We all got together and

I remember your first words when you heard us: 'I've been waiting for you since the beginning of my term'. Even then we thought we would probably succeed.

Julia Borkowska: Agata asked us to write down our experiences, but first, in this regard, we had to read the Code of Ethics, which had been in force at the Academy for a year. We did that and it turned out that every single one of its points had been violated against each of us. We began to identify specific situations from our experience that could be described in terms of breaches of the Code of Ethics. It was difficult, but it made us realise a great deal of things. Speaking out loud, naming the experience of crossing boundaries showed us that this violence is real, concrete – and that it cannot be condoned.

Bernadetta Statkiewicz: I remember very well the moment we were writing *The Diagnosis* together. It was very hot, we were sitting together in the garden of the Ciao Napoli restaurant, we all ordered a pizza and then we started talking one after the other about what was difficult in our experiences. It was somehow pouring out of us, flowing. I still have a yellow napkin, on which I wrote down these events, examples.

Helena Urbańska: Yes, it was very difficult. I have the feeling that patriarchy uses such violent mechanisms that are often difficult to name, to grasp. When working on *The Diagnosis*, every now and

then we would wonder: is this violence? Misconduct? Violation? We often had conflicting opinions on this, because these are also very individual issues. And this is where the Code of Ethics was really helpful, because there are specific principles, values, but also undesirable actions written in it. But working on this document was extremely tiring; I remember the terrible headache it gave me.

Magdalena Sildatk: The interesting thing is that we talked a lot with each other about whether specific situations were misconduct or not. We have different opinions, different sensitivities, we feel our boundaries differently. But that's why this is a conversation that should be happening all the time in our circles, in the Academy community. And it hasn't been there for years, it started recently and that's why it's so difficult.

Julia Borkowska: Indeed, these conversations were turbulent and what one saw as misconduct, another one didn't at all. A big factor here was our very strong emotions towards the educators who taught us. It turned out that these reactions were never lukewarm or neutral. They were always high end of the scale passions. Someone felt very hurt by a professor who, for someone else, was a source of great support. It gave me a lot to think about, and I wonder if this sphere could somehow be more safely managed in drama school, with some kind of greater mental hy-

giene. I don't know. Of course, it's an extremely engaging learning process; we work with ourselves, our bodies, our emotions. But are there any techniques, methods that give more stability, security to these processes?

Brenadetta Statkiewicz: Bearing in mind that our performance uses a different scale, we're still talking about similar things there. Because in it we are trying to show how difficult it is to name violence, how much happens in a grey area, or in such a way that later we are not even able to reconstruct it on a factual level. I know that something happened, I remember the emotions, I remember that I was in the corridor, that some very hurtful words were said. But what specifically did I hear? How exactly did it happen that I ended up vomiting or crying spasmodically in the bathroom? I can't remember. And how am I supposed to recount it now?

Roman Pawłowski: We're still in a Stockholm club, and yet we're talking about the Warsaw Academy. Maybe it's time to ask why you decided to work on the basis of Matilda Vos Gustavsson's reportage '*The Club. Sex-scandal in the Nobel committee*' and not, for example, start directly from *The Diagnosis*, which you are talking about? This is a question to Weronika Szczawińska, director and author of the script.



Photo: Bartek Warzecha

Photo: Bartek Warzecha



Photo: Bartek Warzecha

Weronika Szczawińska: Let me start with how I found myself in this project. I won a kind of casting call for a director organised by actress-students of the then fourth year of acting at the Academy. It's a significant role reversal. I was immediately very excited about the situation, because the process of change in theatre schools and the theatre in general is a subject very close to my heart. I was delighted that the impulse came from female acting students, because I had the conviction that it was there, among female acting students, that such an initiative was particularly needed. Directing had already set in motion an emancipatory process; meanwhile, it was in acting and towards female students that a great deal of misconduct was taking place, which was such well-known corridor knowledge. I wanted it to be as much as possible a project of the actresses, so that their agency would be central to it. So it was about making our meeting as much as possible a response to their needs. However, the truth is that actors and actresses in our system are trained to be deeply subordinate to directors. So we had to consciously design our meeting differently right from the start. I introduced myself as best I could, told them about how I work, what I do in theatre, what I don't do. I wanted the actresses to be as knowledgeable as possible and to be able to make an informed decision about whether they wanted to

work. I also made a commitment that if I got the job, I would present three text proposals of my choice. I got the job, so I presented the proposals: the first was an adaptation of Leonora Carrington's feminist novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, the second was a play with classics – Shakespeare or Chekhov with an all-female cast, and the third was *The Club*.

The actresses chose *The Club*. It seemed the best because even though it showed a different scale, it essentially named the same mechanisms that were a problem in drama school, while not being a direct work on the experiences of actresses and not describing the difficulties of our community. Together we came to the conclusion that we didn't want to make a call out with this performance, but wanted to highlight and disarm the mechanisms of violence against women in the art world. However, this was not a choice without doubts, as working on this text also involved various risks. From the beginning we talked openly about it and I treated these conversations of ours as part of our joint work on the dramaturgy; they set the direction for the work on the script, which was partly written by me and partly – in the part that consists of individual monologues – by the actresses in some collaboration with me only.

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek: Weronika began to talk about the work on *The Club*, immediately pointing out

what is most important to me in this project, which is a consciously developed alternative model of working on a performance. This is an example of what I call “art in action”, a situation in which, while taking up a certain topic, we simultaneously work through it at the level of work organisation, communication, and power relations in the work process itself. This is art that embodies the change it postulates at the level of its message – something I find particularly valuable in artistic practice. This play is not only about how difficult it is to name, to defuse the non-obvious and often manipulation-based mechanisms of sexual violence, how difficult it is to name and find systemic help for those who experience it, but it also transforms reality itself – in this case the very concrete reality of our school. With this performance, the Warsaw Academy as an institution has taken a concrete step on the path of change. The consciously constructed work process transformed the educational experience of the female students, allowed them to empower themselves, to transcend that sense of loss associated with being treated unequally while still within the walls of the school, and showed us all that such a change in work, in the relationship between the actresses-students and the director, who is also a lecturer at the Academy, is possible. That's what I wanted to ask you about now –

this new working model. What was this consciously different way of doing theatre?

Monika Szufladowicz: We started by agreeing on the principles of our collaboration during the first rehearsal, i.e. we created a kind of contract for this particular creative process. Weronika invited us into the process. This was unusual, because it is usually the case that it is the director who sets the rules and the actors are expected to adapt. Our contract also included quite non-standard issues, important to us but never expressed before. For example, the fact that every idea that is thrown around has to be tested on stage. This gave us the chance to bring in our own ideas, often with the rest of us working on the basis of brainstorming, a free, intense exchange, and then drawing out what we wanted to test. Another thing was the rituals, which are very important. We started each rehearsal with a circle where each of us had a minute to herself. She could talk about what she was coming with on that day, how she was feeling, but she could also be silent for that minute. It was a simple tool and it brought mutual understanding, a focus on each other. It allowed a good entry into the work. We wrote down respect for each other's emotions and our individual, fluctuating conditions. Each of us could have a worse day, for example her period, and then she could openly talk about it and this was taken into account. This proved

to be extremely important and it is hard to understand why this does not happen in every job. It doesn't make it any more difficult; on the contrary, it makes the work more efficient, which can be adapted to our condition.

Adrianna Malecka: It was very innovative to have a psychologist on board. Dobrawa Borkała is a psychologist and at the same time an artist in the field of visual arts, and she works with breath in both fields. Her skills greatly supported us in this work. Dobrawa helped us to resolve tensions and conflicts, she was also the one who brought in these work ordering rituals and moderated the process of constructing the contract together.

Weronika Szczawińska: Yes, Dobrawa's role was crucial. She works with the breath as art, and at the same time as a means of knowing and healing oneself, of feeling one's own body. In this project and in relation to the experiences of the actresses, in relation to the theme, that was one of the most important tools. As far as the contract is concerned, it deals in many places with seemingly obvious things that we all agree on, such as respecting each other at work or listening carefully and being open about our needs. These rules are usually not explicitly mentioned and that is why they are so often broken. They are supposedly part of some unwritten contract, but in practice they are completely absent. Writing them into the contract does change things. The grey areas

where, for one reason or another, we allow ourselves to normalise violent behaviour, disappear. It is always possible to refer to such a written contract directly, but this is often not necessary because its very existence works. I'd like to strongly emphasise that working with a contract and being attentive to the condition of each person in the process does not mean that now in the artistic process we no longer face difficult states and are only concerned with making ourselves comfortable, as can sometimes be heard from those opposed to change. Using these new tools is often very demanding – it's not easy, for example, to be aware of one's condition, to be able to communicate it and to take responsibility for it to those with whom one's working. This way of working also exposes such fields of discrimination, which have never been talked about, but are now beginning to be taken into account, by putting the body at the centre. We are a group of women, and when we started to communicate openly, it became clear how important it is to have a period. It was the first time we openly said to each other how enormously it affects the work. Never before in my theatre experience had this question been posed. There was no place for it in any of the processes. If we never talk about it openly, we don't see certain fields of discrimination.

Helena Urbańska: Femininity, the female body was extremely stereotyped in our school experience. Women's bodies were subject to being looked at, but it was never important how they felt. You're wearing stilettos, you're wearing sexy lingerie and you're playing the mistress – the way the patriarchal culture presents it, you're subject to being shaped by the male gaze, you have to be that object all the time... Recently, an important educator from our school, who is also a well-known director, told me that 'theatre without violence is like vodka without alcohol'. This view is still widespread. Therefore, I felt that our work was something special, and at the same time I feel very strongly that this is the future, that theatre has to go in this direction. In my personal history, this is a groundbreaking experience.

Emilia Walus: In this work, for the first time in my life, I experienced that even if I came to rehearsal in a poor state, I came out of uplifted. It's really rare that work, sometimes very difficult, can be such an empowering experience. I just felt that it was a non-violent and respectful work for each of us. I didn't think it was at all possible in theatre that the demands, discipline and sense of mutual obligation didn't have to have a violent component. And then there was this sense that finally we weren't just mothers, wives, lovers, unhappy, raped sisters on stage – that we weren't just women to men, we were talking about broader issues be-

yond love, sex and domestic responsibilities. We spoke up in an extremely serious, reality-changing discussion. We spoke up for our own cause.

Magdalena Sildatk: In this job, for the first time, I had the feeling that I don't have to be constantly at my best – that is, pretend to be at my best. If something bad has happened, if I feel worse, I can come to rehearsal and say so, I can commit to what I can commit to in that state, with full respect for our work and for myself. It's a great relief not to have to pretend that you are constantly the best version of yourself. That's what the best conditions for creativity are. Meanwhile, we're imprinted with the idea that, because there's such deadly competition, we have to be constantly in top form. This is very damaging. In working with Weronika, for the first time I didn't feel obliged to do it. And the other thing, equally important, which I also experienced for the first time in this job, is that if something doesn't work, it's not necessarily my fault as an actress. Weronika was the first director in my theatrical experience who was able to say: 'listen, it's not working, looks like I've had a bad idea, let's try it differently'. So far it's been: "listen, you're doing it wrong, that's not what I mean, you've got to try it differently" – and then three months of waiting until you finally meet the director's vision. If you fail, it's your fault. These new settings Weronika suggested

were extremely freeing. It's a completely different work dynamic.

Julia Borkowska: It was also important that in the course of our work, at specific moments in the process, people from outside of the project invited by Weronika came to us and gave us feedback, which was not an evaluation, but which allowed us to broaden our awareness and opened up interesting perspectives relevant to this stage of our work. It was not an evaluation, more of a conversation, a meeting.

Roman Pawłowski: I wanted to ask you about another dimension of agency that you managed to create in this work, namely the whole sequence of monologues, filling the second part of the performance with solo scenes, whose authors, as I understand, are you – the actresses. I have heard, Weronika, that time was divided very strictly here.

Weronika Szczawińska: Yes, each actress literally had her five minutes. I wrote the part of the script that involved acting together – it's actually a special kind of choreography for ten women. I often work in such a way that, in a sense, the shape of the group dictates the aesthetic shape of the performance. Here, the essential figure was a polyphony of actresses with different interests, very different temperaments, pointing to different elements as being particularly important to them in the material we were working on. So I thought it was my job to create a space for this polyphony.

After the first collective part, the second one was conceived as a series of individual statements that the actresses developed independently, in collaboration with me. It was important to me that there should be no more important or less important roles in the play, because it was a field of painful experiences from school, hence such a strict, equal division of time.

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek: Every theatrical work talks, at some level, about the process by which it was created. I think we should incorporate this regularity into our broader conversation about violence in theatre. We are deeply immersed in a tradition that has taught us to admire the violence encoded in plays for the sake of its higher purposes. This is also why *The Club* is such an important phenomenon, not just for our school. I feel that the story of consciously working with power dynamics that we heard here is there to be read from the structures of this production, from the assumptions of the script, from the movement and musical score formed by the breaths of the actresses turned into a remarkable collective song in the finale. The process behind this work is present in its reception. I think it's very important that we learn this way of looking at art, so that it becomes one more channel of communication that we activate when we come into contact with theatre.

Weronika Szczawińska: This is, after all, one of the important themes in Matilda Voss Gustavsson's reportage and in our performance. Art as religion, as the most precious currency of social distinction (something we experience not just for the sake of experiencing it, but in order to be someone), the condition of the artist based on a special chosenness, actually a metaphysical condition – all this is a perfect context for violence, because it completely obscures the reality of art-making, the process of its production. This, moreover, is amazing about the book and the whole story – that we have to deal with this supreme symbol: The Nobel, the Swedish Academy, the literal highest laurel that descends on the chosen one. Yet here we suddenly see that behind it is a group of extremely troubled people, who are stuck inside a terrible problem, who are entangled in it, and it is simply a problem of a violent, misogynist culture, which is a problem for all of us.

Roman Pawlowski: I have a sense that we are talking about an extraordinary phenomenon. *The Club* is not only an important play on an important subject, but also a vehicle for building a new theatrical practice. The question is: what should be done for this practice to become widespread? And at the same time, is the change you say is taking place at the Theatre Academy deep enough to significantly change the relationships not only

in your school, but in the whole theatre system in Poland?

Weronika Szczawińska: A caveat is necessary here. We are neither the only ones nor the first. There is already a whole movement of people in Polish theatre, who work with these and other tools, support each other, discuss how to work more safely. I co-create the collective Institute for Performing Arts together with Piotr Wawr jr, Anna Smolar, Michał Buszewicz, Marta Keil and Grzegorz Reska [<https://www.inszper.org/>], where we talk a lot about these issues and try to propose in our practice thinking about a different institution, a different understanding of the ensemble. We are developing a practice of constructive and empowering creative feedback, something that is dramatically missing from our theatres and theatre schools. But there are also a whole range of male and female creators, who are consciously and consistently testing new tools and making real changes to working models. This practice is present, though still not treated as crucial in the hegemonic Polish repertory theatre system. When entering institutions with these practices, we often have to function a bit like hackers trying to circumvent the security system that protects the status quo.

Adrianna Malecka: Maybe in fact in the Polish theatre the way we worked is not an absolute novelty, but at the Wasaw Academy it was extremely inno-

vative and for us a completely different activity from previous experiences. It is well known, we are in a process of change which, if it is to be profound, must last. It will take years. But I have no doubt that the change is happening. We can see it, we can feel it. We see the dialogue between the Academy authorities and the students, and it is an open conversation, even if very difficult at times. In July 2021, a meeting of the entire acting faculty with the authorities was organised in Warsaw, where we spoke openly about the difficulties, gave examples of specific situations, behaviours, experiences. These things have been taken up further by the school authorities, clarification processes are underway. We are also thinking together about how to change the school so that such difficult situations do not happen again. The change is resisted by people who know the other theatre, and cannot imagine that it is possible to create and teach without violence, but processes and performances like ours are a tangible example that it is possible. And I very much believe that this is the future of theatre.

Translated by Aleksandra Paszkowska

# Shifting Landscape 2:

Redefining Borders,  
Writing New  
Vocabularies.  
Safe Space working  
and the rise of  
Intimacy Coordination

*Hilary Jones*

## Introduction

On 7 October 2019, The Akademia Teatralna in Warsaw hosted a conference deliberately targeted to address what they considered a pervasive systemic violence inherent in Polish Theatre. Invited to give the keynote address<sup>1</sup> and joined by my colleague Vanessa Coffey and two of our third year acting students Thomas Zachar and McCallister Selva, we presented a three-hour lecture-workshop entitled: *Shifting the Landscape: Privacy, Protocol and the Profession: Why Changing Actor Training Matters in Light of the #MeToo Movement*.

What began as a sharing of the consent-based practice being pioneered by Vanessa at our own institution – The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland – became a catalyst for unexpected revelation and the ensuing determination by our Polish colleagues to dismantle the power dynamics which had normalised misogynistic brutality, the driver for Erasmus: Change-Now!

The ball had been set rolling. But our world was spinning off its axis. Within a few months of the original Change-Now! conference the Covid-19 pandemic was shutting down our industry and our lives. Barely two months later, on 25 May 2020, the unlawful killing of George Floyd in the United States triggered world-wide condemnation and re-ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, rightly forcing us to examine entrenched atti-

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Jones and Vanessa Coffey, "Shifting the Landscape. Privacy, protocol and the profession: why changing actor training matters in light of the #MeToo movement," presented with Thomas Zachar and McCallister Selva, *Change-Now!* (Warsaw: The Akademia Teatralna in Warsaw, 7 October 2019).

tudes and inequities across all sectors of society and Higher Education in particular. Over the past year, increasingly biblical devastation wrought by climate change has seen flood, fire, plague and pestilence wreak havoc across the globe. And with the continued impact of Russia's invasion of and war with Ukraine, many countries around the world have now been forced into a holding pattern while they struggle to stabilize their political and economic situations.

Through all of this – and as a response to all of this – Akademia Teatralna and its partner institutions have held steadfast in their determination to pursue a cultural shift in actor training that properly addresses new ways of working. The resultant collaborations and dialogues with our sixteen participants have been crucial in examining current structures of performance training and whilst it has not always been a comfortable journey, the project remains rooted in a genuine respect for the differences across race, culture, creed, gender identity and generation.

As one of the most recent developments in actor training, Intimacy Co-ordination (IC) is not only at the very heart of collaborative practice but is also dynamic in its response to societal change. This paper seeks to build on the original conference presentation given in 2019 and published in *The Polish Theatre Journal*<sup>2</sup> by examining how, where and why the formalisation of Intimacy Co-ordination has been necessary: how in the

2 Hilary Jones and Vanessa Coffey, "Shifting the Landscape. Privacy, protocol and the profession: why changing actor training matters in light of the #MeToo movement," *The Polish Theatre Journal. A New Landscape with a Rainbow Change – now! Conference proceedings* (January 2020).

aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein exposé, IC has been actively adopted by the film industry, where the challenges currently lie – particularly in the context of live performance and why IC training is now embedding into drama school training in the UK. Via three interviews, I examine its impact on, and influence in, an industry that is determined to re-write the rules.

### Recent History: the land before Covid

On 5 October 2017, the *New York Times* published a powerful report by journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, revealing multiple allegations of sexual harassment against Harvey Weinstein, arguably one of the most powerful moguls in American cinematic history.<sup>3</sup> Five days later, Ronan Farrow's exposé of Weinstein was published by *The New Yorker*.<sup>4</sup> Ten days after the first article, actress Alyssa Milano declared her own experience of Weinstein using the hashtag #MeToo and within twenty-four hours #MeToo had been re-tweeted more than half a million times and received more than 12 million posts on Facebook.<sup>5</sup> Britain was also responding to this outpouring of anger over decades of abuse in the industry. Vicky Featherstone, Artistic Director of The Royal Court organ-

3 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers For Decades," *The New York Times*, 5 October, 2017, accessed 27 November, 2022, <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations>.

4 Ronan Farrow "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," *The New Yorker*, 10 October, 2017, accessed 27 November, 2022 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>.

5 Dino-Day Ramos, "Alyssa Milano Tweets 'Me Too' Hashtag Inspired By Tarana Burke, Raising Awareness Of Sexual Abuse," *Deadline*, 15 October, 2017, accessed 27 November, 2022 <https://deadline.com/2017/10/alyssa-milano-me-too-hashtag-twitter-rose-mcgowan-sexual-harassment-awareness-1202188999/>.

ised a day of action on 28 October 2017, which elicited 150 anonymised reports of inappropriate sexual behaviour (including rape) that had taken place in theatres. The day after, Featherstone published a code of behaviour stating:

Thanks to the bravery, openness and desire to see change happen from the people in our industry who have either experienced abuse or are desperate to see it end, we have been able to compose this document. We at the Royal Court are adopting this today. It is an offering, it is a beginning. We have to start somewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Equity, the Actors Union, now stepped in. Already in the process of issuing their “Manifesto for Casting,”<sup>7</sup> a set of protocols designed to tightly regulate an area of the industry notorious for abuse, Equity set about creating “An Agenda For Change,”<sup>8</sup> which they issued one month after #MeToo:

We are demanding a more professional working environment where our members and future members will not have to endure or observe sexual harassment and where perpetrators understand there is nowhere to hide.<sup>9</sup>

6 Royal Court Theatre, *Preventing Sexual Harassment and Abuses of Power. An offering, a Provocation, A Hope for Culture Change. A Code of Behaviour*, 28 October, 2017, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://d19lfgj8h-luhfw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/06174357/A-Code-of-Behaviour-6Nov.pdf>

7 Equity, “Manifesto for Casting” accessed 27 November, 2022 <https://www.equity.org.uk/getting-involved/campaigns/manifesto-for-casting/>

8 Equity, *Agenda For Change Report*, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.equity.org.uk/media/1263/agenda-for-change.pdf>

9 Equity, *Agenda For Change Report*, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.equity.org.uk/media/1263/agenda-for-change.pdf>, p. 4

This manifesto recognised the importance of inculcating change at ground level and contained significant recommendations for UK Drama Schools, aiming to:

- Develop the Equity student deputy network of student representatives
- Conduct an annual survey to review and improve the relationship between the union and students
- Encourage student deputies to report how bullying and harassment policies operate in their schools
- Maintain regular contact with and visits to vocational educational establishments<sup>10</sup>

Equity also called for safe spaces for castings and auditions and proposed a number of ways to exert pressure in order to ensure compliance, suggesting key organisations such as the Arts Councils, Creative Scotland and the BFI use their leverage with companies and projects they funded. Additional measures included addressing gender balance in the workplace, promoting dedicated helplines, declaring a zero-tolerance approach to violence and sexual harassment at the start of every rehearsal process and ensuring that these policies became part of a signed understanding on every contract.

Into this arena stepped a new voice. Ita O’Brien, a movement director, had long been concerned with the haphazard nature of directed sex scenes. By 2014, she had formalized her approach to establish a specific way

10 Equity, *Agenda For Change Report*, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.equity.org.uk/media/1263/agenda-for-change.pdf>, p. 12

of working that negotiated the issues of touch and consent in scenes of intimacy. In 2017, O'Brien introduced the *Intimacy on Set Guidelines*<sup>11</sup> and by 2018, had begun to train people as Intimacy Coordinators.

IC was slowly being introduced to the profession but many saw it as a threat both to directorial control and to the spontaneous creativity of the actor. Andy Serkis the ground-breaking actor/director and co-founder of *The Imaginarium*,<sup>12</sup> a studio dedicated to performance capture and next generation storytelling, was asked his opinion on the growing call for IC to become an established way of working. This was his reply when interviewed at the 2018 BAFTA awards.

I think that kind of censorship is censorship of creativity. It should be arrived at by the director and the actors involved. They have to find a comfortable way of doing it that will tell the story, because that's what we are all there to do.

It would be a shame if actors become so self-conscious about relating to people. You're there to use your imagination, to create a role. I don't think that you should be stopped from telling the story.<sup>13</sup>

11 Ita O'Brien, *Intimacy on Set Guidelines. Best Practice When Working With Intimacy, Simulated Sex Scenes, and Nudity*, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://www.itaobrien.com/intimacy-on-set-guidelines.html>

12 Andy Serkis and Jonathan Cavendish, *The Imaginarium*, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.imaginariumuk.com/>

13 BBC, "Sex scene rules would be 'censorship' star says," *BBC News*, 19 February, 2018, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-43112055>

The statement was disappointing, though at that juncture, understandable. Although it was not uncommon for actors to have clauses relating to nudity in their contracts, IC was still very much in its infancy. Ita O'Brien interviewed on Radio 5 Live, attempted to clarify:

It's not about no sex. It's not about no kissing. It's not about no nudity. It's actually allowing all of that to happen but in a safe way that allows for authentic, believable, beautiful, juicy, passionate sex scenes. Many directors create beautiful sex scenes in a really safe way. There's not a clear and understood template to go through that everybody knows, in order to make sure that everybody is safe.

That same year in conjunction with the agents CaryDodd Associates, O'Brien released a film explaining the purpose and function of IC in order to establish that 'clear and understood template.'<sup>14</sup>

Vimeo embedded in this article: [Sex Scenes on Set](#)

On the other side of the pond and in parallel to O'Brien's work, the American fight director and choreographer Alicia Rodis was developing her own take on Intimacy Co-ordination codifying systems to address the performance of nudity, simulated sex and intimacy. Now established as industry standards in the US, Rodis, alongside her work for HBO, has been educating faculty and

14 CareyDodd Associates, *Intimacy Coordination & Industry Guidelines*, accessed 24 November, 2022

students at major performing arts institutions including Julliard, Yale and Columbia University, embedding practice that empowers everyone to expect – and demand – appropriate working methodologies.

IC slowly but surely began to embed into the industry and as importantly, was gaining traction as a new form of practice in drama schools both here and in the USA.

And then, the pandemic broke. By 16 March 2020 the United Kingdom was in lockdown. All teaching across the UK – including training at Drama Schools, was reconfigured for online delivery. We became “key workers.” The phrase “Intimacy Co-ordination” was superseded by “social distancing” and “self-isolation.” The fear of inappropriate and abusive contact was replaced with the reality of no contact at all. O’Brien’s training programme was immediately suspended. And all live performance was banned.

On the 16th July 2020 – three months after the first lockdown began, Equity produced a statement declaring its support for Intimacy Co-ordination.

The three guideline documents can be accessed here: <https://www.intimacyforstageandscreen.com/guidelines.html#>

At the same time they issued a new hashtag #This Is Not Working, in protest at the British Government’s lack of action on their previous recommendations.

No-one of course had any concept of how long the pandemic would last or what its impact on our industry might be. By the late summer of 2020, the film sector was cautiously re-opening: cast and crews were “bubbled” into special “isolation villages” where they would remain for the duration of the shoot and a whole new raft of Health and Safety measures were introduced. Under the aegis of “The Covid Marshall,” policed sets ensured rigid mask wearing and constant PCR testing. Weeks of filming were lost if someone tested positive and actors often found themselves isolated abroad if they contracted Covid-19 whilst on set. But at least this sector of the industry was fighting back. When the RCS (along with the majority of accredited UK drama schools) attempted to resume in-person teaching, it was under the new concept of “blended learning” determined by the constraints of complex space planning and enforced social distancing. Governed by rigid protocols, mandatory mask wearing and bi-daily lateral flow testing, the one-way systems, hygiene stations, split cohorts and severely restricted access meant our buildings were like the ghost ship Marie Celeste. All plays had to be directed with social distancing as a pre-requisite. Live audiences remained forbidden and thousands of pounds were spent on creating a hybrid form of performance where the socially distanced acting onstage was filmed for livestreaming. England’s National Theatre had pioneered this approach since 2009 with highly successful broadcasts of its own productions but drama school output also had to compete with streaming services readily available from terrestri-

al giants such as Netflix, HBO, Discovery, National Geographic and Warner.

At 6.31am on the 8 December 2020 the UK saw its first citizen receive the new Covid jab,<sup>15</sup> but whilst the advent of vaccinations gradually allowed live performance to resume, the longed-for epiphany as theatre experienced a post-covid renaissance, simply did not happen. The immense costs incurred during the pandemic meant a huge reduction in output. Many venues that closed never re-opened and even the toe-tapping West End musicals were forced to shut their doors early. And with the key risk mitigation for Covid-19 being social distancing, it was assumed – well, the actors aren't actually touching anymore are they? – that Intimacy Co-ordination was no longer a necessity and certainly a luxury that few drama schools and theatres were able to afford. This was a fundamental misconception. IC in response to Black Lives Matter, growing debate surrounding gender identity politics and the exponential crises in mental health largely- though not exclusively triggered by the pandemic, was evolving and had become about so much more than the choreography of simulated sex.

### **Right here, right now.**

As I embarked on the writing this paper in July 2022, the media and my newsfeed were once again head-

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<sup>15</sup> NHS England, "Landmark moment as first NHS patient receives COVID-19 vaccination," accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/12/landmark-moment-as-first-nhs-patient-receives-covid-19-vaccination/>

lining issues around Intimacy Co-ordination. Sean Bean – one of the most high-profile British actors of his generation and renowned internationally for his role as Ned Starck in *Game of Thrones*, had dismissed Intimacy Co-ordination declaring it removed spontaneity and was a form of censorship. His response was virtually identical to that of Andy Serkis, four years earlier.

"It would inhibit me more because it's drawing attention to things," Bean said of having an intimacy coordinator in the room. "Somebody saying, 'Do this, put your hands there, while you touch his thing...'"

"I think the natural way lovers behave would be ruined by someone bringing it right down to a technical exercise," he added, comparing his experience to the raunchy 1993 adaptation of "Lady Chatterley's Lover," in which he starred opposite Joely Richardson.

"Lady Chatterley' was spontaneous," Bean said in his interview with the U.K.'s Times Magazine. "It was a joy. We had a good chemistry between us, and we knew what we were doing was unusual. Because she was married, I was married. But we were following the story. We were trying to portray the truth of what D H Lawrence wrote."

Bean also decried the censorship of his work at the behest of TV companies or advertisers, citing the recent "Snowpiercer" TV series in which he stars where he filmed a scene naked alongside Lena Hall. In the bi-

zarre Season 2 scene the duo become intimate with the aid of a mango (as in the fruit). But Bean said “I think they cut a bit out actually. Often the best work you do, where you’re trying to push the boundaries, and the very nature of it is experimental, gets censored when TV companies or the advertisers say it’s so much. It’s a nice scene, quite surreal, dream-like and abstract. And mango-esque.”

When the interviewer pointed out that intimacy coordinators can help to protect actors in the wake of #MeToo, Bean responded: “I suppose it depends on the actress. This one [referring to Hall] had a musical cabaret background, so she was up for anything.”<sup>16</sup>

I make no apology for the length of this quote. In unpacking Sean Bean’s statement, I hope to illustrate how the current remit of IC has evolved since 2017 and to examine the intransigence and hostility that still surrounds this subject.

Intimacy Directors International offers a good introduction to the role and function of Intimacy Coordination with an approach centred around what they call “the five pillars:”<sup>17</sup>

**CONTENT** Before any choreography can be considered there must first be an understanding of the

<sup>16</sup> K. J. Yossman, “‘Games of Thrones’ Star Sean Bean Says Intimacy Coordinators ‘Spoil the Spontaneity,’ ‘Decries Censorship,’” *Variety*, 8 August, 2022, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/sean-bean-intimacy-coordinators-1235335687/>

<sup>17</sup> Intimacy Directors International, *Pillars of Safe Intimacy: Rehearsal and Performance Practice*, accessed 24 November, 2022, [http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/924101\\_924a4af5ad7d47aa9d357d70450de14f.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/924101_924a4af5ad7d47aa9d357d70450de14f.pdf)

story and the given circumstances surrounding a scene of intimacy. This creates safety, eliminates the unexpected and ensures intimacy is always in service of the story

**COMMUNICATION** which suggests frank and continuous discussion between director, intimacy director, stage management and actors. and an openness to dissent any actions in the process. With avenues for reporting harassment available to the entire ensemble.

**CONSENT** which must be established before any scene of intimacy can be addressed and which acknowledges that consent can only be given by the person receiving the action, Choreography must start from a place of understanding consent ensures that all parties are clear and provides actors with the agency to remove consent at any time.

**CHOREOGRAPHY** where each scene of intimacy must be choreographed with that choreography strictly adhered to for the entire production

**CLOSURE** at the conclusion of every rehearsal or scene of intimacy, actors are encouraged to develop a closing moment between them to signify the ending of the work. It is a moment to leave characters, relationships, and actions from the work behind, and walk back into real lives. They suggest too that all parties (including outside eyes) exercise proper self-care during and after the run or filming of intimate projects.

I’d like to begin at the end with “Closure” as the attention given to issues of mental wellbeing by IC is becoming increasingly important. Let’s be clear about the role of Intimacy Co-ordination. *No* IC “tells” an actor —

or director to “do this.” The choreography of an intimate scene is a carefully negotiated set of conversations between the actors to determine their level of comfort and consent and the director to ensure their creative vision for that intimate moment genuinely translates for the audience. O’Brien uses the following analogy, arguing that

There is an inherent risk in un-choreographed sex scenes; a risk of trauma, and a risk of sexual harassment.... Any scenes involving fights or stunts are discussed in advance and mapped out to avoid anyone sustaining injury. It could be argued the emotional and physiological injury sustained in a poorly directed sex scene could have much longer lasting implications, and cause much more hurt, than any physical injury.<sup>18</sup>

No fight director in their right mind would hand daggers to actors untrained in armed combat and instruct them to “have a go.” The risk of life-threatening injury would simply be too great. Yet the “having a go” approach has often been the sole direction for scenes of an intimate nature. With no guidance or reference, actors do what they have done for generations: draw on their own personal sexual experiences.

In 2010, the University of Lancaster initiated a research project “Making Sense Differently – Narratives

18 Laurence Cook, “After Weinstein, a New Way to Approach On-Set Sex Scenes,” *Backstage*, 25 January, 2018, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://www.backstage.com/uk/magazine/article/weinstein-new-way-approach-set-sex-scenes-2186/>

of Learning and Teaching about Mental Health.”<sup>19</sup> As artists with research backgrounds in “Performance Stress,” Mark Cariston Seton (then a research fellow at the University of Sydney, Australia) and I were invited to begin a dialogue exploring the fine line between the demands of actor training and the medically recognised parameters of sustaining good mental health.

Our starting point interrogated the tradition of actor training which – in most UK Drama schools – is largely rooted in the “affective memory” approach of Stanislavski, a system that requires the actor to recall memories of similar emotional import to those of the character they are portraying. Theatre literature demands actors explore some of the darkest territories of the human psyche and re-live some of its most brutal experiences. Mark Cariston Seton in his article “Post-Dramatic Stress – Negotiating Vulnerability for Performance” refers to the “psychological hazards of the theatre” and is clear that our responsibility as educators is “to provide our acting students with the interpersonal resources to incorporate the experience of performance in as resilient manner as possible.”<sup>20</sup>

What Cariston Seton and I both acknowledged twelve years ago was a fundamental lack in drama school training of protocols that allowed actors to fully process and integrate the worlds they were inhabiting so that the

19 Project led by Jill Anderson Senior Project Development Officer Mental Health in Higher Education Department of Applied Social Science Lancaster University

20 Mark Cariston Seton, “Post-Dramatic’ Stress: Negotiating Vulnerability for Performance,” accessed 27 November, 2022 [https://www.academia.edu/242592/\\_Post\\_Dramatic\\_stress\\_Negotiating\\_Vulnerability\\_for\\_Performance](https://www.academia.edu/242592/_Post_Dramatic_stress_Negotiating_Vulnerability_for_Performance)

play/film could not act as a trigger for prior trauma. That in order to ensure mental wellbeing it was vital to manage the world of the character and the reality of the actor's life as distinct and separate entities. With "recall" and "reliving" traumatic experience cited by psychologists as potential triggers in mental health breakdown, the unstructured "have a go" approach of intimate scenes risked conflating the actor's personal sexual experiences (and I include possible experience of abuse as well as pleasure here) with the world of their character. Seton's recommendation that actors be given interpersonal resources to build resilience is now an integral and increasingly necessary part of Intimacy Co-ordination.

A fight director will always risk assess a knife fight in order to minimize the chances of physical injury. IC's also "risk assess" the potential emotional and mental impact of an intimate scene. The Risk Assessment is a recorded document submitted to the producer/director in advance of the shoot and will contain clear guidelines about what has been agreed in terms of boundaries and the level of consent and what is expected in order to protect both cast and crew. Closed set practice - established for many years in the film industry, is now being adopted in drama schools with only necessary staff and production students permitted. Wardrobe will immediately robe the actors after a take and extensive use of prosthetics such as nipple shields and penis sheaths ensure direct genital contact is reduced if not eliminated entirely. Respect is a given and that courtesy is extended to crew as well as cast.

Risk assessment also navigates the likely long-term impact of Intimate scenes. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, neuropsychologist Bessel Van Der Kolk explored the myriad ways in which human physicality retains the emotional impact of trauma.<sup>21</sup> Even though, on a conscious level an actor playing Medea recognizes they are not actually killing their children, the deep psychological connection realised in performance through the power of text in action, "imprints" a hyper reality. IC's now actively employ "De-roling" – literally coming out of a role – using a series of exercises at the end of each rehearsal /shoot to ensure actors are supported in the separation of "self" and "character". It is an essential part of the IC's toolkit and customary to hold further check-ins with the actor/s in the days following a difficult scene in order to ensure their continued processing and well-being. Mental health first aid training is now an established part of learning to be an IC and crucial if we are to eliminate the type of experience described here by Nicole Kidman.

For her turn in *Big Little Lies*, Kidman took on the role of Celeste, a mother of two who often engaged in rough sexual acts to please her abusive husband Perry (Alexander Skarsgård). One scene in episode 7 particularly stood out for Kidman.

"I remember lying on the floor in the bathroom ... and I just wouldn't get up in-between takes," she recalled. "I was just lying there, sort of broken and crying, and I remember at one point [director Jean-Marc Vallée]

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<sup>21</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (London Penguin Random House, 2014)

coming over and just sort of placing a towel over me because I was just lying there in half-torn underwear and just basically on the ground with nothing on and I was just, like [gasps]”.... The effects of those feelings were hard to shake when the cameras stopped rolling though. “I would keep on a very brave face at work and then I would go home and I didn’t realize how much it had penetrated me,” she said. “It affected me in a deep way.”<sup>22</sup>

But let’s return to Sean Bean’s statement. Whilst Bean notes he and Joely Richardson “knew that what we were doing was unusual” and refers to the “good chemistry”<sup>23</sup> between them, such positivity has not always been the experience of actors.

Alongside de-roling, IC has introduced other innovative approaches to support the separation of *self* and *character*.

## IC and New Vocabularies

The use and choice of language has become a key strategy. Active employment of vocabulary rooted in medical terminology creates a psychological distance from the intimate language of real-life sexual encounter – no “touch his thing” here. By using description that names body parts – vagina instead of pussy, penis rather than

22 Dave Quinn, “Nicole Kidman Felt ‘Deeply Humiliated’ Filming ‘Big Little Lies’ Abuse Scenes: ‘It Affected Me in a Deep Way’” *People*, 29 June, 2017, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://people.com/tv/nicole-kidman-deeply-humiliated-big-little-lies/>

23 K. J. Yossman, “‘Games of Thrones’ Star Sean Bean Says Intimacy Coordinators ‘Spoil the Spontaneity,’ Decries Censorship,” *Variety*, 8 August, 2022, accessed 24 November, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/sean-bean-intimacy-coordinators-1235335687/>

cock, inter-gluteal cleft in preference to bum-crack, language used in the choreography of an intimate scene helps defuse tension caused by unfamiliarity or uncertainty (actors rarely know each other before working together) and blocks inappropriate comment. Actors are encouraged to adopt this terminology and taking ownership reinforces their consent-based practice. This process actively underpins the world of the character rather than the reality of the actor and allows each actor agency in expressing their own personal boundaries.

In describing the mango scene in *Snowpiercer*, Bean refers to censorship “at the behest of TV companies or advertisers.” The script is unavailable so it is difficult to comment on the intricacies of what might have been filmed, but Bean’s comment on *Lady Chatterley* which references the heart of his work as an actor is also at the heart of IC: “We were trying to portray the truth of what D H Lawrence wrote”.

That surely is the point of all storytelling. To uncover the essence of the narrative and tell it is authentically as possible. Any editing process is highly skilled and complex: choosing the best shots to portray key moments, revealing multiple possibilities, a character’s innermost thoughts. Much of what is filmed ends up on the cutting room floor. Perhaps the mango moment did not enhance or advance the storyline and whilst this might be pure conjecture, it illustrates another facet of this work as Intimacy Coordinators don’t only help craft a scene, they advocate for the actor’s truth.

If a scene is considered gratuitous by the actors, IC will open up a discussion on its actual relevance. This is not censorship but genuine enquiry, allowing all parties – actors, directors, crew and the production company to create the best possible film. Such an approach also enables actors to come out of their comfort zones where it is appropriate: no one would disagree with Bean’s point that pushing the boundaries and being experimental often results in the best work. The point of establishing clear boundaries in IC means that you know how to push them safely.

This clear sea change – the active questioning of the relationship between a moment of intimacy and how it might serve the plot line, is a deliberate and long overdue attempt to rein in the inclusion of gratuitous sexual content. The stories of directors requesting unnecessary “rehearsals” involving unexplained nudity or personal sexual revelation are legendary and sadly still happening but will become much less likely as IC embeds into all areas of our industry. Bean’s closing comment elicited a vehement response on social media: “I suppose it depends on the actress. This one [referring to Hall] had a musical cabaret background, so she was up for anything.” Whilst it might be construed as admiration for Lena Hall’s openness, it could also be argued that it reflects a historical misogyny that assumes the very nature of acting involves some degree of performative promiscuity.

Lena Hall responded by saying: “Just because I am in theatre (not cabaret, but I do perform them every once in a while) does not mean I am up for anything. Seriously does depend on the other actor, the scene we are

about to do, the director and whatever crew has to be in there to film it.”<sup>24</sup> Hall also defended Bean saying he is “an awesome actor and made me feel not only comfortable but also like I had a true acting partner in those bizarre scenes... If I feel comfortable with my scene partner and with others in the room then I won’t need an intimacy coordinator. BUT if there was any part of me that is feeling weird, gross, overexposed etc I will either challenge the necessity of the scene or I’ll want an IC.”

The inevitable backlash provoked a flurry of counter-interviews and opinions, but the overwhelming response was in favour of IC and thoughtfully expressed by Rahul Kohli who tweeted the following at 8.44pm on 8 August 2022:

I’ve worked with a few intimacy coordinators now and while ever so slightly embarrassing at first are essential for protecting our safety, making us comfortable and opening up constrictive dialogue between the actors and director when scenes call for “intimacy.” At 36 I’m still uncomfortable with my body and the social anxiety/awkwardness of scenes that call for nudity/lovmaking etc. I can only imagine just how terrifying it is for younger actor and I’m glad that we now have a system in place to protect them.<sup>25</sup>

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24 K. J. Yossman “Sean Bean’s ‘Snowpiercer’ Co-Star Lena Hall Responds to Intimacy Coordinator Comments,” accessed 27 November, 2022 <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/sean-beans-snowpiercer-co-star-lena-hall-responds-to-intimacy-coordinator-comments-1235336761/>

25 Wikipedia, *Rahul Kohli*, accessed 24 November, 2022 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rahul\\_Kohli#:~:text=Rahul%20Kohli%20\(born%2013%20November,and%20Midnight%20Mass%20\(2021\).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rahul_Kohli#:~:text=Rahul%20Kohli%20(born%2013%20November,and%20Midnight%20Mass%20(2021).)

Intimacy Coordination remains in the media spotlight and continues to polarise both the public's perception and the opinion of actors themselves. Those with status in the profession are able to write their own rules.

In 2019, Alicia Vikander described her own approach to sex scenes to *Harper's Bazaar*.

"I probably did my first sex scene at 20 and it's always been technical, as it should be," she said at the time. "It should never be anything but technical." She added that she implements a personal rule to ensure the cast and crew are focused on efficiency while filming. "I tell the crew it's a one-taker," she said, "that way, everybody on set is on point because you have to get it done in one take. ... I think that's the way to do it because then everyone feels comfortable and then hopefully – although it is super strange and uncomfortable – a little magic comes through a lens and people will be convinced."<sup>26</sup>

I love this statement. It comes from a place of empowerment and a recognition that both the actor and the crew are doing a job and that everyone should be respected. But for those new to the profession and less able to call the shots, Intimacy Coordination is vital in ensuring their wellbeing. Phoebe Dynevor, one of the young stars of hit Netflix series *Bridgerton* noted how much time and preparation went into blocking the seemingly effortless sex scenes with Regé-Jean Page:

26 Naomi Gordon, "How Alicia Vikander takes control in sex scenes: I tell the crew it needs to be done in one take" *Harper's Bazaar*, 13 November, 2019, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.harperbazaar.com/uk/culture/culture-news/a29754427/alicia-vikander-sex-scene-netflix-earthquake-bird/>

It really was like shooting a stunt, it looked real, but we've got padding on... I mean, I've shot intimacy scenes before in the past without any of that. And I can't believe really how new this all is, because it just changed the game...we felt super safe and it just meant that when we got on set, we already knew exactly what we're doing... so it just meant that there wasn't any room for a director to go, 'Oh, I want to see this now.'<sup>27</sup>

The film and television industry has wholeheartedly embraced IC with companies such as Netflix invested in training new generations of Intimacy Coordinators. Theatre clearly recognises a need but is often at the mercy of budgetary constraint and after a series of abuse allegations involving leading companies (including the Boston Ballet).<sup>28</sup> the dance world has also begun to engage Intimacy Coordinators as part of their creative team. Scottish Ballet pioneered the use of IC in their Spring 2022 production of *Mayerling*<sup>29</sup> and the Royal Opera House – acknowledging that much of its classical repertoire recounts stories of sexual abuse, recently employed Ita O'Brien to

27 Andrew Pulver, "It was a misuse of power': how screen sex scenes have been forced to change," *The Guardian*, 29 January, 2021 accessed 27 November, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/29/it-was-a-misuse-of-power-how-movie-sex-scenes-change-keira-knightley>

28 Derek Hawkins, "Former Boston Ballet star and her husband sexually abused young dancers, lawsuit alleges," *The Washington Post*, 1 October, 2021, accessed 25 November, 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/10/01/dusty-button-ballet-lawsuit/>

29 Brian Ferguson, "Scottish Ballet brings in 'intimacy coaches' for first time in its history," *The Scotsman*, 3 March, 2022, accessed 25 November, 2022 <https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/scottish-ballet-brings-in-intimacy-coaches-for-first-time-in-its-history-3594096>

work with their cast on its reimagining of George Frederik Handel's *Theodora*.<sup>30</sup>

However, this recognition by live performance and the film industry that IC safeguards both company values and their employees is countered by pockets of resistance from performers themselves. For genuine change to be effected, cultural shifts need to happen at grassroots level. So how are drama schools connecting with this radical new approach?

To find answers I interviewed three people who have a vested interest in IC. All are working actors and all would describe themselves as activists and advocates.

Sharon Mackay – a recent graduate of The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland now works as an IC across theatre, film and television. She has a particular interest in engaging with young (child) actors and part of our discussion focusses on her approaches to establishing a “safe space” for both child and adult performer. She talks eloquently about her own experience as a student when her first acting role required her to play a sex worker, how this propelled her into IC and continues to shape her own advocacy.

Interview 1: Sharon Mackay

<https://on.soundcloud.com/rHd8d>

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<sup>30</sup> Nadia Khomami, “Royal Opera House hires intimacy coordinator for sex scenes,” *The Guardian*, 29 January, 2022, accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/jan/29/royal-opera-house-hires-intimacy-coordinator-ita-obrien-handel-theodora-sex-scenes>

Mercy Ojelade is a highly respected actor, colleague and now Associate Head of Acting at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She begins by relating a recent professional experience where another cast member assumed he could kiss her without any discussion or seeking her consent. In recounting this incident Mercy echoes much of the testimony I have already referenced citing actors who think IC is irrelevant. She also shares her brilliant and inspired approach to using consent-based practice within her acting classes, ensuring creativity is at the forefront in the exploration of boundaries in order to serve the narrative of the text. Describing Intimacy Coordination as “another form of storytelling” there is a quiet insistence that a second narrative should always run in parallel – that of open dialogue between the actor and director.

It is these two approaches embraced in tandem that she feels will help flatten the hierarchies of power – and ultimately of abuse. Mercy’s phrase – “the etiquette of asking” is a perfect addition to the new vocabularies established by IC and again echoes one of the key protocols of all consent-based practice- the normalisation of saying “no”. In the final section of this interview, Mercy comments extensively on the environment young, inexperienced actors face when they first enter the profession – a theme also explored in the third conversation held with Maureen Beattie who recently stepped down after four years as President of Equity – the Actors’ Union of Great Britain.

Interview 2: Mercy Ojelade  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/8qV6x>

Maureen was the driving force behind the original safe space statement issued by Equity in 2017, the Agenda for Change referenced earlier and the collaboration with and promotion of Intimacy Coordination. She talks frankly about her own experience as a drama student, the pervasive culture of “droit de seigneur” which overshadowed her early experiences as a young actor, Equity’s response to the Weinstein exposé and the impact of abuse on the mental health of actors. Maureen and I begin our conversation by asking ourselves why we – as women of an older generation – never felt empowered enough to call out those in the industry who had objectified and harassed us. Her final comments – a brutally honest take on the humiliation and rejection so often experienced by new drama school graduates as they vie for employment in an overcrowded profession, answers that question.

Interview 3 Maureen Beattie  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/xJbXy>

## Conclusion

The financial challenges of our post-Covid-19 world mean that Equity’s original recommendations for every drama school to adopt and report on the use of IC protocols, have been re-shaped. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has a policy of employing IC when produc-

tions require it and in addition holds training sessions so that every acting student understands consent-based practice and the concept of boundaries. Vanessa Coffey with whom I began this journey, has recently trained associate RCS staff to become Intimacy Coordinators as the expectation is that demand for this work will grow and as importantly, runs courses for production crew so the new vocabulary of IC becomes a common language. This reflects the publication of 20 specific guidelines by the Intimacy Coordinators Guild supported by Equity and published in July 2022,<sup>31</sup> which aims to educate and empower Equity’s membership along with cast and crew of associated unions (such as BECTU) into “the etiquette of asking” and an expectation and acceptance of IC support when appropriate.

The role of Intimacy Coordination has seen significant expansion in its responsibilities and now encompasses certification in bystander intervention, equality diversity and inclusion Law, anti-harassment and bullying awareness, power dynamics (navigation of on-set culture and understanding of on-set etiquette), allyship (particularly with and for the LGBTQI+ community), anti-racist awareness training and mental health first aid. Alongside the original requisites of movement skills, masking techniques, choreography, experience in, and understanding of, the industry and an awareness of on screen sexual and intimate storytelling, IC continues to pioneer innovation

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<sup>31</sup> Equity, “Equity supports Intimacy for Stage and Screen Guidelines” accessed 24 November, 2022 <https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2020/july/equity-supports-intimacy-for-stage-and-screen-guidelines/>

in artistic practice and no doubt will further evolve in response to the geo-politics of our ever-changing world.

As I share these final thoughts and as 2022 draws to an end, British cinemas are screening *She Said* - the true story of Meghan Twohey and Jodie Kantor's determination to bring down Harvey Weinstein. Earlier this autumn, National Theatre Live screened the highly controversial play *Prima Facie* in which Jodie Comer played a working-class lawyer who calls out a colleague for date rape. All showings were accompanied by an infomatic supporting "The Schools Consent Project"<sup>32</sup> a grassroots organisation founded by young female lawyers who works specifically with schools to call out inappropriate behaviour and introduce consent-based practice. It is not in the re-telling of abuse that the eradication of abuse will happen but in the empowerment that is engendered when those who have experienced abuse and knowing they are not alone, find support in commonality and a collective voice of protest. The extraordinary impact witnessed in the aftermath of #MeToo bears testament to this, and its legacy is the rise of IC.

I'd like to leave the last word on the subject to Michaela Coel, actor, activist and author of the breathtaking BAFTA award winning consent-based drama *I May Destroy You*.

I want to dedicate this award to the director of intimacy, Ita O'Brien. Thank you for your existence in our industry, for making the space safe. For creating physical, emotional and professional boundaries, so that we can

32 Schools Consent Project, <https://www.schoolsconsentproject.com/> accessed 25 November, 2022

make work about exploitation, loss of respect, about abuse of power without being exploited or abused in the process.<sup>33</sup>

33 Halle Kiefer, "Michaela Coel Dedicates BAFTA TV Award to *I May Destroy You*'s Intimacy Coordinator," *Vulture*, 6 June, 2021, accessed 25 November, 2022 <https://www.vulture.com/2021/06/michaela-coel-dedicates-bafta-award-to-intimacy-coordinator.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThank%20you%20for%20your%20existence,or%20abused%20in%20the%20process.%E2%80%9D>

Intimacy  
Coordination:

A Tale of Rights,  
Resistance  
and Revolution

*Hilary Jones,  
Meryem Elise  
Şengün*

This presentation was given at the Change-Now! conference at the Warsaw Akademia, March 23rd, 2023.

## **Good afternoon**

My name is Hilary Jones and I represent the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I'd like to thank my colleagues here in Warsaw for hosting this conference and to introduce my co-presenters who have been participating in the Change-Now! project: Molly Quinn and Meryem Sengun.

I've titled this brief presentation *Intimacy Coordination: A Tale of Rights, Resistance and Revolution* because it's those three elements that have defined the journey of IC during the past five years.

When I first introduced this subject at the inaugural Change-Now! conference in 2019, it was with joy and relief that finally- finally- we had developed tools and a system that would help safeguard, call out and dismantle the long decades of abuse that had been normalised by our industry. I had no idea of the enormity of its impact. I also had no idea our world was about to be shut down by Covid. Few of us could have predicted the seismic societal shifts we have undergone in the past four years – not just as a result of a worldwide pandemic, but in response to the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the resulting destabilization of global economies or of the cataclysmic fires and floods wrought by climate change. Through all

of this and in response to all of this, the Change-Now! project has continued to interrogate how we might shift our thinking and re-shape the myriad ways in which we train the next generations of performers.

In 2014 when Ita O'Brien first formally introduced Intimacy Co-ordination as a specific technique in the UK this new movement-based practice was seen as a specific means to enable choreography of intimate scenes where safety and consent were paramount. Today, the training of Intimacy coordinators not only requires knowledge of movement techniques but demands:

- negotiating and communication skills that reference an understanding of cinematography,
- knowledge of modesty garments and related prosthetics,
- certification in allyship for the LGBTQI+ community,
- ant-racist training,
- Equity Diversity and inclusion
- advocacy,
- boundary and consent-based practice
- the use of medical-based vocabularies that help establish and underpin safe working practices.
- mental health first aid including de-roling techniques and the ability to risk assess the impact of intimate scenes.

IC – more than anything else I can think of – acts as a mirror to societal change. A more in-depth analysis supporting this argument will be published as part of

the proceedings of this project later this summer, but as we only have twenty minutes to present this afternoon, I'd like to focus on three key aspects;

*Rights:* embedded through boundary training and consent-based practice as part of their drama school experience to enable and empower future generations of actors.

*Resistance:* both to the concept of IC shown by members of the profession and of IC itself to the perpetuation of abuse by the industry and the quiet

*Revolution* that is now taking place in the fields of Opera and Dance.

So, without further ado, I'd like to invite Molly Quinn to talk to her own experience of IC. (Molly spoke about her own journey as an acting student at the RCS – Please note a more detailed overview of how The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland employs IC's on its productions and includes this work as an inherent part of the actor's training is written about in the upcoming paper: SHIFTING LANDSCAPES 2: Redefining Borders, Writing New Vocabularies – Safe Space working and the rise of Intimacy Co-ordination).

Resistance is defined by the English Oxford dictionary as 'a situation in which people or organizations fight against something or refuse to accept or be changed by something'. When I began writing my paper for this project last summer, Sean Bean – a high-profile British actor best known for his role as Ned Starcke in Game of Thrones was dominating the newspaper headlines for his resistance to the use of Intimacy Coordination. His claim

that IC ‘was a form of censorship and denied creativity’ was identical to that of fellow actor Andy Serkis (best known as the voice of Golem in Lord of the Rings) who four years earlier at the BAFTA awards had also decried IC. A month ago Sir Ian McKellen – another highly acclaimed and garlanded British actor in an interview with our poet laureate Simon Armitage claimed Intimacy Coordinator’s ‘got in the way and ruined the purity of theatre.’

Each of these attacks elicited a vehement response from two sectors who actively support the use of IC: actors who identify as female and younger generation actors who identify as male. So, the obvious question to ask here is whether resistance is an issue of gender and generational expectation? Well – yes. But it is also an issue of hierarchy in an industry that has so long been controlled by powerful men. Three weeks ago, the BBC aired an amazing documentary created as part of the Storyville series. Simply titled Sex On Screen, it consisted of film clips and interviews stretching right back to the advent of the movies. In analysing the mid-20th century change in Hollywood censorship from “romance without sex” to “sex without romance”, the documentary made clear that from Jane Fonda’s frank admission to being drunk in order to cope with the exploitative nudity in Barbarella to the recent litany of reported assault by Weinstein that our industry had found a way of normalising inappropriate behaviour. Again and again we hear the same stories and it all boils down to one thing, Abuse of power.

Sean Bean, Andy Serkis and Ian McKellen have one thing in common. They are lauded and highly ac-

claimed actors – major players in the industry and that gives them power. Intimacy Coordination is there to advocate for and protect those who do not. But resistance is a two-way process and the collective voice in support of Intimacy Coordination- actors who refuse to be exploited any longer, their advocates – the ever growing army of trained IC’s along with progressive and respectful directors, crew and producers and those in allyship, are equally determined to create a stronger tide of resistance to ensure young actors just out of drama school have the right and the courage to demand safer spaces and an environment where consent-based practice is a given. I’d now like to invite Meryem Sengun to take the floor.

**Hello (again),**

my name is Meryem Elise Şengün and I am here today to talk about the way Intimacy Coordination is beginning to be embraced by the dance world.

I began dancing at the age of four, won a scholarship to the Dance School of Scotland at the age of 11 and then did my degree studying modern ballet at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Being a dancer requires a lot of strength: physically, mentally and emotionally. This all starts from an incredibly young age. As ballet dancers we have to wear very tight clothing for the aesthetic of the lines and shapes we create, which ultimately results in our bodies being exposed. Touch is an important part of the learning of technique particularly for the safety of pas de deux, which is

usually male/female partnering and always taught by male teachers who need to ensure the lifts are positioned correctly. During my training I was lucky enough to be taught predominantly by female teachers, yes I did have a few male teachers, but not once did I bat an eyelid to question whether or not being touched was an absolute necessity.

Ballet is an art form rooted in centuries of traditional teaching and extremely hierarchical in its structures. The world is familiar with the stories of abuse in the film industry. But it wasn't just the film world calling out people: the international ballet world has also been rocked by a series of high-profile scandals in recent years. Some of these include major ballet companies and schools such as the Boston Ballet and New York City Ballet in America, and in the UK: English National Ballet and Ballet West where the abuse was so profound that the entire school and company were shut down. It is deeply ingrained in the dance world to say yes and not to say no. If you speak out about anything you're not comfortable with, you fear that you will be looked at in a different light and deemed difficult to work with. However, the advent of IC means that dancers' voices are now being heard within the companies.

Dance is an extremely expressive art form, unlike actors and singers, we don't use our voice to tell stories, we use our bodies and facial expressions. The dance world is now recognising that for certain productions, it is a necessity to include IC's on the creative team to ensure the companies' safety. As part of their 2021–22 season, Scottish Ballet, Scotland's National dance company,

performed *The Scandal at Mayerling*, based on the true story of Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria, known for his extreme sexual appetites and violent behaviour. Scottish Ballet brought in IC's for the first time as the narrative included scenes set in a brothel and rape.

I was curious to know how this innovation had been received and for the purpose of this presentation, spoke to newly promoted first artist, Harvey Littlefield on his experience working alongside the ICs. I asked him the question – *How do you feel about intimacy coordinators coming to work on productions?* He answered „I feel that is an important part of training to keep the dancers safe, especially with hard hitting ballets that involve a lot of touch and the enactment of sexual acts. The idea for the ICs is not to change the choreography but to make sure that the dancers speak to each other about consent and boundaries and if they're comfortable with doing certain moves. We as dancers want to respect the choreography and choreographers but in order to do so we must have an understanding of IC and the ability to take this knowledge and make it a safe environment.

I then asked Harvey – *Do you feel that having Intimacy Coordination workshops whilst training in Vocational Dance Schools would be beneficial?*

He replied: „I think it's more important for IC to start at a young age because then those dancers will have those tools when they're moving away from home so if unacceptable things happen, they know how to deal with the situation and feel able to talk about it. Even though I believe boundary training and consent should start from

a young age it's still beneficial to have workshops on intimacy coordination, even if you're in your first year of a company or your tenth year, it's important that all dancers learn about it and not only the dancers, but ballet masters, ballet directors and anyone in the environment of the company, because it's not just the people who are physical that can abuse their power”.

I am now hoping to train as an IC with the aim of using my dance background to promote a better understanding of this work in the early years of dance training. Harvey is right and I agree wholeheartedly, that the best way to prevent abuse is to open up the culture of ballet and create a shared understanding and vocabulary that allows dancers to feel safe.

It is heartening to see all sectors of our profession seriously engaging with Intimacy Coordination. Not just as a means to avoid potential litigation, but in genuine respect for the physical and mental wellbeing of everyone involved in the industry. With major Streaming giants Netflix and HBO routinely training IC's, programmes are also being rolled out to everyone involved in production: from DOP's to directors, fight choreographers to foley artists and first AD's, IC is being embedded, understood and embraced by all.

Safety and creativity are not enemies but bedfellows. Without IC we would not have had the extraordinary success of international hit series such as Bridgerton or Sex Education.

From the whisper networks to the howls of protest, the voice of IC is getting louder.

## Post-script

Since writing this paper, Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in collaboration with Ita O'Brien (and subject to validation by the University of East Anglia) have announced they will be offering the first MFA in Intimacy Practice to start in September 2023.

“With no knowledge  
or conversation,  
we felt like we were  
in a horror movie”.

Intimacy coordination  
in the theater and in  
theater schools

*Katarzyna  
Waligóra*

## 1.

*Sex Education*, directed by Michał Buszewicz at the Szczecin Contemporary Theater (premiere in 2022), opens with a scene of Helena Urbańska talking about her debut. The actress asks questions: “Is there a membrane in the human body that breaks when you first enter the stage?”, “Does the first time hurt?”, “What if you don’t have a catharsis?” Urbańska is using the metaphor of a theatrical debut and a theatrical performance in general to talk about sexual initiation and sexual intercourse. She concludes her monologue with the sentence: “When we started maturing, with no knowledge or conversation, we felt like we were in a horror movie.” This is clearly a reference to the long-standing, grievous lack of *sex education* in Polish schools and the general inability to hold conversations about sex and sexuality. The scene can also be viewed differently: the stage and sexual debuts may look surprisingly alike if we consider that most actors regularly participate in kissing and sex scenes.

I have quoted Buszewicz’s *Sex Education* because of several similarities between *sex education* and the subject of this paper: intimacy coordination, especially in the variant that I would like to describe here. One such connection is a broader aim of increasing agency and facilitating informed decisions on what happens to people’s bodies. Like *sex education*, intimacy coordination normalizes sex and sexuality, provides the language for discussing this aspect of human (and theatrical) experience, breaks barriers of shame, fear and anxiety, and offers

accurate knowledge, where people have previously relied on dubious sources and makeshift solutions. I would argue that both also make these acts – whether on stage or in the bedroom – safer, more enjoyable and satisfying.

## 2.

Since April 2022, I have been working on the funded project *Safe Space. Good practices and tools for the transformation of the Polish theater system*, led by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. The project, financed by the Science for Education program of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science, aims to introduce changes in theater school education and initiate a broader shift in the Polish theater community. It is rooted in the report *The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations*, written by a team of sociologists from the University of Warsaw, based on research commissioned by the Academy of Dramatic Art to diagnose the presence of abuse, discrimination and boundary violations in the school. As one of the tasks of the Safe Spaces project, student actors (and soon also student directors and their teachers) participate in a four-hour intimacy coordination workshop. The workshop is run by Kaja Wesołek-Podziemska (who often goes by her maiden name) – psychologist and intimacy coordinator.

Wesołek debuted in this role when the Polish producers of the series *Sexify* for the streaming platform Netflix were required to employ someone to facilitate

scenes of intimacy. When Netflix introduced intimacy coordination as a standard for all of its productions, it was the very first time that a specialist like that was sought in Poland (Kurek 2021). Wesołek was a good candidate as a licensed psychologist, who had already worked on film sets as a consultant for difficult scenes involving minors.

I had the opportunity to observe four workshops, for students of the third and fourth year, and separately for students of the first year, which took place on June 9, 12, 13 and 15, 2022 in Warsaw. Izabela Zawadzka and Małgorzata Jabłońska were observers at the other workshops that have been conducted so far (two in Białystok and one in Warsaw, respectively). During our project team meetings, we talked about the course of those workshops multiple times. I also have access to my colleagues' notes. In this text, with their approval, I cite articles and books we found together as relevant to this project.

## 3.

Several terms are used to refer to the profession discussed here, not all of which exist in the Polish language. In the United States, they are: “intimacy professional” – anyone who specializes in working with scenes of intimacy both in theater and in film; “intimacy director” – someone who works in the theater and with other live events; “intimacy coordinator” – someone who works on film and television sets; and “intimacy choreographer” – an older expression concerning mostly the specific task of choreographing intimacy scenes. The phrase “intimacy

designer” is sometimes used; for example, Kate Busselle’s school is called Heartland Intimacy Design & Training. In Poland, “intimacy choreographer” has the same meaning as in the U.S.; “intimacy coordinator” refers both to film and theater, while “intimacy director” is not in use. In this text, I have chosen to apply the Polish terminology.

Intimacy coordinators are typically invited to film sets for scenes of kissing and nudity as well as any scenes involving sex, including arousal (e.g., masturbation) and simulated intercourse (both consensual sex and rape).

Claire Warden from the Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) school proposes that the job of an intimacy specialist involves three types of tasks. Firstly, they advocate for actors. Intimacy coordinators make sure that the performers maintain the full capability to decide about their bodies and to give or not give consent to anything that may be happening. Secondly, they interface between different production departments (e.g., they contact people responsible for preparing the costumes and arrange the purchase of special underwear, or inform the marketing department which of the actors’ images can and cannot be used). Thirdly, they plan the choreography of intimate scenes, telling the story of a sexual encounter through gesture and movement as well as effects such as breath and sound (*Everything to Know* 2021). These three tasks overlap with three ways of protecting actors listed by intimacy coordinator Sarah Lozoff: obtaining informed consent (including making sure that everyone knows what it is), creating working protocols aimed at the maximum comfort of the performers (ones that define, for example,

who will be responsible for covering the performers after a nude scene) and composing the choreography of intimacy (*Sex Scenes* 2021).

In her workshops, Kaja Wesolek explains to students that a scene of intimacy is a story told with movement. Therefore, when making one, professionals establish what the scene means for the characters in it. The first kiss is different from a kiss after seven years of marriage, and different from a kiss to start an extramarital affair. Embedding the scene in its context and maintaining it in the framework of fiction is important because it relieves the actors of the necessity to refer to their own experiences – and thus of discussing their own intimacy. Wesolek says that a scene of intimacy needs to be explained as if the people involved in it have never even kissed anyone. However, she adds that she often hears phrases on sets like “and you know what happens next” instead of detailed descriptions. Such quasi-instructions assume that actors have sexual experiences that they wish to share – which is exclusionary and oppressive. As Sarah Lozoff comments in an interview:

We don’t go: “Show me what it looked like the last time you were in a bar fight?... “When was the last time you were in a sword fight? Oh, sorry, you can’t do this.” None of us have that experience! Right? And, somehow, when it comes to this extremely private, vulnerable, intimate thing, we rely on what we actually do in our bedrooms. Oooh, I don’t want to do that! “Let me show you what I do at home” – that’s super creepy, it’s very inappropriate and it’s going to be boring. (*Sex Scenes* 2021)

The task of an intimacy coordinator, apart from advocating for the actors, is to understand the objectives of a film or theater production and the director's vision to then help in its implementation. Therefore, "choreography" is only one of the 5Cs: the five commonly accepted pillars of intimacy coordination, developed by the now-defunct organization Intimacy Directors International (IDI). The other four are: consent; context – the intimate scene always functions in the context of other scenes and the broader narrative of the work; communication; and closure – the necessity of introducing a "de-roling" practice (of leaving the character) and a clear divide between work and private life.

#### 4.

It is very difficult to tell a consistent history of intimacy coordination and choreography. In their doctoral theses, both Jessica Steinrock (co-founder of IDC) and Kari Barclay indicate that the term "intimacy choreography" was first used in a 2006 MA dissertation by Tonia Sina (Steinrock 2020; Barclay 2020). Working as a martial arts teacher, fight scene director and choreographer, Sina realized the need to treat intimacy scenes similarly.

Working on her degree in 2006, Sina was looking for a term to define actions that she and others had taken much earlier. What we know as intimacy coordination today has emerged from many years of work by choreographers, fight scene directors, stunt doubles and film and theater school teachers. In their introduction to a set of

texts on intimacy coordination published in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Joy Brooke Fairfield has pointed to some less obvious factors of influence, such as dissenting actors who redefined traditional techniques (especially those based on the Stanislavski method), theater pedagogy by Black teachers attempting to fight race-based discrimination and queer BDSM communities, who created mechanisms such as the safe word, which was later borrowed by intimacy professionals. Fairfield also writes:

Indeed, consent practices formalized by intimacy choreographers for the process of staging simulated sex are informed by the cultural work done toward normalizing negotiation of consent within scenarios of actual sex, efforts that have been historically led by survivors of sexual violence, sex workers, porn performers, sexuality activists, and members of kink communities. (Fairfield 2019, 68)

Tonia Sina has worked in many theaters, Steinrock writes, and, with time, some started to list intimacy specialists as co-creators of performances with the role often being combined with a fight scene coordinator (Steinrock 2020). One such institution was the New York Flea Theater, which hired Yehuda Duenyas as a "sex choreographer" for Thomas Bradshaw's *Fulfillment* in 2015 (Barclay 2020). According to Barclay, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New Yorker* wrote about Duenyas's work in the production, and the term "sex choreographer" stirred some interest on social media (ibid.).

Intimacy coordination would not have reached today's popularity if it had not been for two events. The significance of the first one was largely limited to the United States: in 2016, cases of abuse and sexual harassment were uncovered at the Profiles Theater in Chicago (Levitt, Piatt 2016). In response, representatives of the theater industry established the organization Not In Our House, which published its *Chicago Theatre Standards* defining the guidelines of safe theater work. Among them were the requirements to pre-determine the details of intimate scenes, and obtain consent at every stage of work (*Chicago Theater Standards* 2016). The second event was global: in 2017, allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein led to the emergence of the #MeToo movement and to revealing much abuse in the film and theater industry. Both events increased the demand for the techniques that intimacy coordination had to offer. In their aftermath, the idea of consent entered the vocabulary of intimacy coordination. A staple today, the term had not been used by intimate scenes choreographers before 2016 (Barclay 2020).

In 2016, Tonia Sina and two other intimate scenes choreographers: Alicia Rodis and Siobhan Richardson created the organization Intimacy Directors International (IDI) to strengthen the position of an intimacy coordinator. In 2019, the organization dissolved upon concluding it had fulfilled its task. By that time, there had been 23 intimacy directors affiliated with IDI (Barclay 2020).

Steinrock contends that the *New York Times* article entitled *Need to Fake an Orgasm? There's an "Intimacy Choreographer" for That* (Laura Collins-Huges, 2017) was

the watershed moment for intimacy coordination. The text not only explained the responsibilities of an intimacy coordinator, but it also popularized the name of the profession itself. Other national and industry media followed suit (Steinrock 2020). As more people became interested in the profession, the demand for intimacy coordinators grew – and, consequently, so did the demand for appropriate training. When the pandemic had left many in the industry without work, they found the time to expand their skills.

But even before the pandemic erupted, another breakthrough moment happened. Actor Emily Meade requested the employment of intimacy coordinators for the second season of HBO's *The Deuce* – a series on the golden age of porn. Alicia Rodis' work on set proved so successful that in 2018 the network prescribed the mandatory presence of intimacy coordinators for all intimacy scenes in all of its productions (Steinrock 2020). Other streaming platforms soon followed its example (Hilton 2020). One can suspect that production companies use services of intimacy specialists so eagerly not only because they desire to ensure the safety of their actors, but also because they fear legal and public consequences of sexual harassment on sets in the post-#MeToo era. This hypothesis is supported by the circumstances of Rodis' employment with *The Deuce*. At the time, the series was being criticized for hiring James Franco, whom several actresses (neither of which worked for *The Deuce*) had accused of inappropriate sexual behavior (*How intimacy coordinators* 2020). It is hard to tell whether Meade's request would have been met so enthusiastically in other circumstances.

Decisions made in the headquarters of powerful American corporations were valid all over the world. This was how intimacy coordination reached Poland. As I have mentioned, the series *Sexify* was the first production to engage Polish intimacy professionals: Kaja Wesołek, Anna Zabrodzka and Agnieszka Laskowska-Ziemian.

Currently, there are several people working as intimacy specialists in Poland. They have been trained at different courses in various countries. Their most frequent engagements are on film and television sets (especially of those companies that mandate intimacy coordination). They have only worked in theaters a handful of times.

No legal requirements have been designated for intimacy coordinators – neither in Poland, nor anywhere else in the world. As a result, anyone can pursue the profession now, even without any specialist training – which may potentially lead to dangerous situations. Although the Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has published its *Standards and Protocols for the Use of Intimacy Coordinators*, where they have listed the training required of an intimacy coordinator (including psychological first aid, anti-racism training, anti-mobbing training, informed consent training, mediation training), the document is in no way legally binding (*Standards* 2021). Although several schools offer a certification process, the matter is further complicated by the fact that: the training is very expensive; it takes place in distant countries; it often requires at least some in-person participation; it is conducted in English; and the number of places for students is very

limited. Moreover, not everyone agrees that the certification process should be globally standardized. For example, Chelsea Pace (2020) argues that such standardization may lead to exclusion and limit cultural diversity.

## 5.

Kaja Wesołek's four-hour intimacy coordination workshop at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw is certainly not intended to prepare students for working on stages and sets in that capacity. However, it is supposed to provide some basic knowledge that can help participants protect themselves and their scene partners in the future.

The workshops have a fixed structure, with some modifications based on a group's attitudes and needs. The meeting starts with personal introductions and establishing some working rules. Next, Wesołek asks each participant to articulate their expectations for the workshop, which usually takes over an hour because the trainer responds to any of the students' questions right away. A large part of the theory is presented this way, including: the definition of an intimate scene; the role of an intimacy coordinator and how they can help actors; the basic principles of communicating with directors and scene partners; the basics of self-preparation for an intimate scene and of coping with emotions; information on how to identify one's boundaries and the idea that the boundaries need to be respected regardless of the hierarchy in rehearsals and on sets.

Questions asked by students are very diverse. They can be divided into several categories which helpfully map the areas of uncertainty and curiosity. First, there are questions on coping, often asked by people who have not had the opportunity to engage in an intimate scene: “How to cope with stress before such a scene?”, “How to cope without insecurities involving physical appearance?”, “What to do to conquer embarrassment?” Another area pertains to relationships with other people involved in the creative process. Here, actors are especially vocal about their fear of opposing their director, displeasing producers and being considered “difficult”. Some questions are: “How to talk to the director about why nudity needs to appear in a scene?”, “What to do if I say ‘no’ and the director doesn’t accept my refusal?”, “How do I speak without seeming arrogant?”. Students are also interested in the relationship with a scene partner: “How to talk about intimate scenes?”, “How to help a partner who’s nervous?” Some questions reveal the underlying deep issues that plague the film and theater industry: “What to do if I don’t want to act in an intimate scene with someone who’s intoxicated, when I know that my partner cannot act without getting drunk or high?” Questions in the third group concern the role of an intimacy coordinator and what can be expected of them. Lastly, the fourth category are questions on the production and construction of a sex scene. Many of them are detailed and technical, such as: “What should changing look like on set?”, “What happens between takes in sex scenes?” The most interesting questions are the ones that start a discussion about the line between fiction and

reality during sex scenes: “Can actual penetration happen in a sex scene?”, “Are all sex scenes acted?”, “Do actors French kiss?” Although the participants are of different ages and have had different experiences (from never having acted in a scene involving intimacy to having already worked with an intimacy coordinator), uncertainty about what may happen at work is universal. In addition, the young actors are resistant to the idea that a sex scene can be a choreographed, technical encounter of two professionals rather than an emotional experience. Some fear that if they rely on their craft for such scenes, the quality and believability of their work will suffer. Moreover, even senior students admit that although they have had experiences of sex scenes, they have never been provided the tools to discuss them and conduct them safely. The theoretical part is concluded with a presentation of modesty garments for scenes of intimacy.

In the next part of the workshop, after a short warm-up, the students are asked to do three exercises, inspired by Chelsea Pace’s 2020 book *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (with a contribution by Laura Rikard). Addressed to students, teachers and intimacy coordination trainees, the book is currently one of the most valued sources of practical knowledge on creating intimate scenes. Kaja Wesolek says that the exercises she selected for the workshop are “safe”. The students do not attempt to create intimate scenes, and touch is only involved in one exercise.

In the first task, the participants stand in a circle and ask each other to trade places. They test different

replies. The objective is to try out the soft refusal method and make the actors aware that any training they have undergone so far relied on their unconditional “yes” to every request.

In the next exercise, they work in pairs and stand at a certain distance from each other. Then, one person approaches the other slowly until the partner says “wait”. The exercise is aimed at establishing the students’ comfort zone and sensitizing them to their body’s reactions as it signals the crossing of intimate boundaries.

The third exercise is the most complex. The students consider it the most important (which is reflected in their many favorable opinions). Again, they work in pairs, taking turns. One person points to places on their body where they can be touched (excluding their genitalia and breasts). Then, they ask to take their partner’s hand and touch the places that they have marked as safe with it. The goal is first for the students to examine their own bodies, second to prepare the bodies for touching, and third to show their partners where, how and with what pressure hands can be placed on it. The exercise can be done as a warm-up before rehearsal or a performance involving a scene of intimacy. The students quickly realize that the more they leave their comfort zone, the better the exercise works.

In the final part of the workshop, Kaja Wesolek discusses the choreography of intimate scenes, including dynamics such as touch of varying intensities, breath, closeness and domination. Due to the students’ many questions and the four-hour limit, not much time is left

for intimacy choreography. However, one objective of the *Safe Spaces* project is to develop a syllabus for classes on intimacy coordination which may be permanently included in the curricula of theater and film schools.

The workshop ends in a very short de-roling exercise: the students act out taking off an imaginary diver’s suit. This is how Wesolek encourages them to develop their own routines of leaving the character, and the goal of the exercise is to mark the difference between the private and the professional life. This is consistent with one of the 5Cs of intimacy coordination I have mentioned: closure.

Kaja Wesolek’s workshop at the National Academy of Dramatic Art or even participation in a full-length university course will not render the presence of intimacy professionals in rehearsals and on sets any less necessary. Neither will it be the magic wand to solve all problems of abuse and violations. Still, there are several reasons why such solutions should be implemented in theater schools.

First and foremost, intimacy coordination classes have the potential to impact the dynamics of what happens inside schools. They give students and teachers the necessary tools to do so. In the wake of a wave of call-outs and revealed testimonies of abuse that has recently rolled through Polish media, the need for a profound reform of theater education has come to light. As the authors of *Staging Sex* diagnose:

Acting school is an exercise in saying yes to everything. (...) The message they internalize is that they can’t ruffle any feathers, ask any hard questions, or say no. They

believe saying no, or even questioning a direction, might make them “hard to work with.” The “Easy to Work with Myth” is pervasive. By sending the message that an actor is a person that says “yes,” and takes risks, it comes through loud and clear that a person looking to protect themselves and says no isn’t cut out to be an actor. (Pace, Rikard 2020)

This is confirmed by Susanne Shawyer and Kim Shively in their paper *Education in Theatrical Intimacy as Ethical Practice for University Theatre*. The authors introduce a helpful distinction between a boundary as something that must never be crossed, and a barrier, such as the fear of failure, which may significantly limit the development of young actors. Learning to say “yes” is intended to help bring down barriers, but in fact it often violates boundaries. Shawyer and Shively write:

The question remains: How does one help an untrained actor remove emotional barriers if they do not understand the difference between a boundary and a barrier? If the teacher is simply replicating what they experienced in actor training without an awareness of the difference themselves, an attempt to remove barriers might easily lead to circumstances where boundaries become blurred or crossed (Shawyer, Shively 2019, 95)

Because of this, the researchers consider the introduction of some aspects of intimacy coordination to theater education as an ethical task.

Another reason why classes similar to those offered by Kaja Wesolek should be introduced in theater schools results from the recognition that what intimacy coordination teaches is not limited to scenes of intimacy. Examining one’s own boundaries, managing them, saying “no” as well as respecting the needs and limitations of a scene partner are useful skills for many professional situations. Intimacy coordination also adds new acting techniques to the actors’ toolkit: intimacy choreography creation methods and specific, direct, unashamed language to talk about acting in sex scenes. Even if some students would never apply these skills in the future, there are no disadvantages to having them just in case.

However, some time will pass before intimacy coordination becomes the standard on all Polish stages and sets. Students who come to the workshop, regardless of whether they are in their first or fifth year, usually do not know about the existence of safety protocols, have fears of acting in sex scenes, and need specific, substantive advice. The earlier they get it, the better prepared they will be for doing their jobs. The workshop also spreads awareness about the role of the intimacy coordinator and what the actor can expect of them. It encourages actors to request a coordinator’s presence in their workplace. Consequently, actors and directors become aware that they can ask for help and benefit from professional support.

The knowledge that such classes provide may prove vital in deciding to accept or decline a job offer. Recognizing their own boundaries, predispositions and the challenges they are willing to face allows young actors to

deliberately carve out their creative path. As Kaja Wesolek explains to students, some directors suggest risky working methods, and some actors love that working style. And this is okay too – as long as they make an informed and voluntary choice. However, in order to make one, actors need to explore their own preferences, ideally in the safe conditions of their school.

Translated by Aleksandra Paszkowska

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Decision to be queer.

On reorientation,  
becoming with  
HIV and artistic  
positioning

*Szymon  
Adamczak*

## 1. A decision to be queer

It starts with a decision. According to Richard Ford (2007)<sup>1</sup>, queer is “a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a *decision* to live outside some social norm or other”. Born either straight or gay, “one must decide to be queer”. Queer(ness) would be “by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant”, as David Halperin proposed<sup>2</sup> (1995). In this essay, I am going to situate queerness as a relational and non-universalizing modality, rooted in the lived experience of bodies, transversal and abundant in its manifestations. It is a cultural project that centres process and becoming, intimacy, sex and sexuality, and as such cannot be pinned down to one thing, be it a label or an identity. It speaks of difference, whether sexual, cultural or religious and it sits with the tensions that difference creates. Keeping in mind this expansive understanding of queerness I want to deliberate on queer positionality (and its implications) as a strategy of choice in various aspects of pedagogy across the performing arts education and theatre sector in Poland and in The Netherlands, where my practice primarily takes place.

When – or how – have I decided *to be queer* and how does it relate to my unfolding positioning in the theatre context? I am thinking of the paths taken and other paths I started to follow but discontinued along the way. My early experiences of working in a professional

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<sup>1</sup> Ford, R. T. (2007), What's queer about race? *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3), p. 477–484.

<sup>2</sup> Halperin, D (1997), *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford University Press, p. 62

theatre were experiences of an amateur and autodidact. As an aspiring theatre journalist and student in the humanities with an individual trajectory, at the age of 20 I was only just starting to become familiar with the landscape of Polish and international theatre at large. Suddenly, together with a friend, I won an open call for a debut-project in a major venue. Overnight I turned into an emerging artist, and was now wrestling with the (theatre)machine and its customs for the first time. Ever since theatre became my occupation, I have been overcoming my ignorance. Initially it was coated with self-deprecating shame, but eventually, I started wearing my ignorance as a badge of honour and to consider it a resource. Not knowing is a matter of epistemic humility. Ignorance becomes a resource when not assuming allows others to open horizons that are not accessible to us first-hand.

Having entered the so-called theatre “market” through the open-call backdoor, I started a practice as a dramaturg. At the time, the role of the dramaturg was perceived as rather vague, mystified and confusing to others in the field. It was one that needed no diploma to get in, and yet the dramaturg always had to justify their reason for existence.

I never studied at a theatre academy in my country of origin, and so I have always found it hard to relate to the specific, first-hand, affective experiences that animated my student-colleagues. My proximity to female identifying students of the directing department in Kraków gave me an insight into the theatre academy as a residue of male privilege, with its normative violence

and sexism, and the persistence of unchallenged ideas on how theatre making should be practised and by whom. The authorial position of the theatre director was dominant, with directors standardly amassing most of the credit for the collective labour that is theatre, not to mention being granted the greatest authority and highest remuneration. A couple of star-directors would serve as role-models to be followed by students, without much discernment, not to say blindly. It seemed to me that an endorsement of a masterful mentor was a prerequisite to success. I myself had not found an individual mentor I could look up to, to the exclusion of others, but I had found many I wanted to learn with and from: people modelling other ways of theatre-making. I benefited the most from observing, participating, or being actively involved in the working affairs of such women theatre curators and programmers active in Poland like Agata Siwiak, Anna Lewanowicz and Marta Keil.

I had and still have a love-hate relationship to what can be habitually called “straight” theatre. The conventional kind. The theatre as a mirror. Plus well-made and not-so-well-made-plays full of heterosexual romance. Or, occasionally, the normal staging but this time with more spice, which is whenever heterosexual theatre directors would go for something somewhat “gay”. Something progressive, inclusive, socially relevant. Liberal – yet never liberating. I have often dreamt of “quitting it” or “escaping it”: “straight” theatre. I will come back to this yearning later on, in the last part of this essay.

Before you read further, perhaps you could take a moment to stop and imagine – what is “straight” theatre or “straight theatre” or “normative theatre” for you?

When I think of “straight” theatre, the first formal aspect that comes to my mind is a clear, unproblematic separation of audience and performance space. Staging prewritten scripts, especially from (the national canon of) dramatic literature, is common if not preferred in “straight” theatre. There is likely a plot, characters and probably a subtly pervasive claim of universality. “Straight” theatre is invested anthropocentrically in the category of the “human” or “the human experience”, but one that is never interpellated. There is a performance of compulsory heterosexuality expected of the cast, and a societal presumption for the audience to be made up of heterosexuals or addressed as such. (“Straight theatre” is not paranoid, is it?) “Straight” theatre is internalised, the audience is to be on its best behaviour. “Straight” theatre reproduces normativity even if it’s made by gay-identifying directors. Moreover, it incentivizes them to keep their (sexual) identity out of view, in private. After all, we are told, private identity is secondary to the *art* which is primary and transcendental, so why should we allow the identity of the maker to spoil the reception of art(istic experience)? (Who can “afford” disclosure and what it means is a question that has been haunting me for a while).

When I moved out of Poland to pursue my Masters studies at DAS Theatre in Amsterdam in 2016, I did not call nor position myself as “queer” nor did I yet understand myself as “cis-bodied”. A low income gay would

do; which is to say: I am of a millennial generation from Eastern Europe, second-handedly witnessing the emergence of homonormativity (Lisa Duggan’s concept<sup>3</sup>) and the increasing social acceptance of (white, monogamous) gay men via American, streamable television. Despite having migrated, I certainly saw myself reflected among many of us, LGBTQ+ people becoming increasingly dehumanised by a polarising Polish right-wing, populist, nationalist government and discarded by the unprogressive, shockingly indifferent liberals that just lost political power. Only when I left Poland, realizing how an identity can be weaponized against me and my non-biological kin, I started to perceive myself as queer, politically speaking, and have been wondering since how this positioning will inform my creative practice and choices related to it.

## 2. Becoming HIV-positive

John Bell: There seems to be some kind of political philosophy imbedded in Quotations [of a Ruined City]. Could you describe it?

Reza Abdoh: I believe that one has to not be a victim.<sup>4</sup>

Settling down in the Netherlands was as precarious as it can get despite a starter scholarship from the motherland to keep me afloat: months living out of a suitcase, staying on other people’s floors and sofas before

3 Duggan, L (2003), *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

4 „To Reach Divinity Through the Act of Performance”: An Interview with Reza Abdoh, Reza Abdoh and John Bell, *TDR* (1995) 39 (4).

finding a temporary *woning*. The first one I pettily called a “student prison”; the second was as big as a two-person mattress. I was counting every eurocent and waited as late as possible to register in the country, as long as my European Health Insurance card from Poland was still valid. Periodically I took cheap flights back to Poland in order not to lose *important* = paid projects, keeping up with my dramaturg-abroad job in Kraków and living my not-so-well-protected mid-20s in style.

The moment of disorientation came not with the aforementioned movement within the Schengen zone, but about when I quietly left my dramaturgical post in the wake of the new Ministry of Culture institutional takeovers in Poland. I found myself starting the second year of my Masters studies broke and uninsured and then, right after, I was diagnosed with HIV.

Sara Ahmed writes about experiences of disorientation as “bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground<sup>5</sup>”. Hil Malatino aptly points out that such experiences, as “they bear on questions of liveability and survival<sup>6</sup>”, characterised by an “affective gradient of unsettling to shattering”, can also be vital and reorienting or as they persist, they enable a shattering self to find itself in a permanent crisis. I have experienced HIV diagnosis as disorienting because I found myself being navigated through a healthscape in a foreign country with a useless if not outdated set of cultural and social preconceptions of the illness coming from another

5 Ahmed, S (2006), *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press, p. 156.

6 Malatino, H, (2022) *Side Affects. On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, The University of Minnesota Press, p. 51-52.

place. Late diagnosis is commonplace in Poland, so it goes for the migrants hailing from the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA)<sup>7</sup> when entering HIV care in the Netherlands. I expected first to crash, skin and bones, and then rise like a Lazarus, but I was just weaker than usual, confused. To understand the contemporaneity of living with HIV, I simply needed to *live* it. After the disorientation of diagnosis, this is how I relate to reorientation: first, as a path towards embodiment – the acknowledgement of material and political proximity of my body and HIV; second, as a way to be in community with other bodies and to gravitate towards spaces where there is acceptance, care, knowledge and intimacy with the problem of HIV. A phrase that encapsulates a mission of a New York based collective *What Would an HIV Doula Do?* poignantly speaks in this direction: “Since no one gets HIV alone, no one should have to live with HIV alone.”<sup>8</sup>

I was held, supported and admittedly privileged enough to avoid falling into the downward spiral. My process of reorientation – personal and professional – was inextricably tied up with the process of becoming HIV-positive. I took a leap into studio work to pose my questions. “My theatre won’t cure HIV. What can it do?”, I asked first. I learned that practising theatre can be transformative. It can move me and my witnesses into *knowing*. *ART<sup>9</sup> is therapeutic* – immunising, restorative – I would laugh at times as I was getting better.

7 According to trends analysed in the reports by HIV Monitoring Foundation (SHM) in the Netherlands.

8 Website of the WWHDD: <http://hivdoula.work/>

9 “ART” is an abbreviation for antiretroviral therapy.

Second question: “I am not the first one nor the last to live with HIV. What is my relationship to the virus?”. I discovered that the dramaturgies of living with HIV (and dying of AIDS) I knew so far did not fit with my experience. The detection of this virus inside made me reflect on the level of our very ontology in a more-than-human perspective<sup>10</sup>. *Our* co-existence is now facilitated by a biomedical complex. One pill a day keeps a virus at... bay. The premise is to live with the virus, perhaps to age despite it being curable or not, instead of having the prospect of dying from a complex illness looming over me. Through performative work with the artist Billy Mullaney, I have been exploring this limbo-esque status quo through physical theatre tools, articulating mutual dependence onstage by multiplying the relationships that are at stake when the virus and a body are involved. Billy – in solidarity with me – has been conjuring and manifesting a virus in my direction, so I could do the work of relating, becoming, and healing – and reveal it eventually in front of an audience.

Adam J. Greteman in “Queer Thriving” (2018) reminds us of the notion of “becoming” as one of the central occupations in queer theory: “Becoming, as an active verb, holds open a process that is both never ending, but also rooted in its own time and place. Becoming is wrapped up in histories and presents while also engaged in the futures it may or may not touch”. For me, becoming HIV-positive meant being engrossed in the genealogies

<sup>10</sup> Here, I am pointing towards an evolutionary and epigenetic aspect of human becoming on the planet, which involves viruses and other forms of life and non-life. It has been a balancing act for myself to avoid anthropomorphization of the virus both conceptually and practically, as in working onstage with a form of non-life that cannot be perceived by the naked human eye.

of responses to HIV/AIDS, navigating the present and starting to chart the future with the virus in body-mind. It is not a specifically queer thing to be HIV positive, but to be HIV positive feels *queer*.

“What does it mean for *this* body to be HIV-positive, today and in a forever changing world”? I was – and still am – becoming-HIV right in the wake of the “undetectable era”, which has been followed by a wider roll-out of PrEP across the richest countries of the Global North<sup>11</sup>. The premise of undetectability creates a situation that renders bodies with HIV safe to others as long as they are medicalized and medically surveilled in order to maintain this status. It is hard to think about the problem of HIV without mentioning hegemonic neoliberal subjectivity<sup>12</sup>, which places the responsibility on the individual while leaving behind unsuccessful ones to face the consequences alone.

In this context, I found myself engaged with HIV in a threefold manner: rehearsing the roles of patient, citizen (activist), and artist. I have come to assert HIV and its related culture as part of my identity as a way to overcome auto-stigmatisation. By disclosing my serological status through a theatrical performance I wanted to counter the trauma of infection that has been passed down, informing the livelihoods of generations of gay men like me worldwide. However, disclosure itself was not a merit

<sup>11</sup> PrEP stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis: medicine taken to prevent getting HIV.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Houghton, *Becoming a neoliberal subject*, <https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/becoming-neoliberal-subject>, accessed 7 February 2023.

of my artistic work<sup>13</sup>. It is the perceived non-universal performativity of becoming HIV positive with its materiality and relationality, the double process of disorientation and reorientation in the aftermath of HIV diagnosis, which performance as a medium hopefully allowed me to convey. Notes by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on queer performativity are instructive, as my wish was familiar: “to offer some psychological, phenomenological, thematic density and motivation”. In this usage, “queer performativity” is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect, shame and to the later and related fact of stigma<sup>14</sup>.

While working with HIV as a theatre maker who became part of formal and informal HIV networks and communities, I found myself in a curious position. In the performing arts context in the Netherlands I was a fresh graduate who came from Poland and was talking about a chronic health issue with an urgency that created a cognitive dissonance to people whose youth was in closer proximity to the AIDS crisis than mine. A Dutch dramaturg of a production house in Amsterdam in conversation about programming the performance shortly after my graduation in 2018 disclosed to me that her friends are living with HIV as well and they are doing just fine. What is the problem, then? They moved on. What about you? Here, I refuse to see my interlocutor’s myopia as singularly classist and ableist. It is a tenet of neoliberalism

13 It is worth annotating the isolated performativity of the act of HIV disclosure and the way it is constructed via secondary performances in the press, media, etc.

14 Kosofsky Sedgwick, E (1993), “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*”, *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1(1).

to reduce systemic analysis to interpersonal affects and to demand inward reflection “upon one’s own positionality within systems of oppression, focusing on individual lived experience”<sup>15</sup>. It is to individualise suffering, which later on can be marketised and commodified by a successfully resilient self. I would argue that in the landscape of performing arts in the Netherlands, heavily altered by neoliberalist policies, financial cuts and general scarcity, individualisation at large has had a depoliticizing effect on the scene. A culture of urgency created a heightened sense of an individual that would stand-in for whole communities, national and ethnic identities, all in the name of diversity and inclusion.

Chi Chi Shi (2018) observes that contemporary turn to trauma, suffering and victimhood as a function of (and in reaction to) neoliberalism results in a potentially new form of collectivity, based on reification of trauma as outwardly politicised identity. A coalition of sufferers is however more occupied with fighting symptoms, the results of oppression vs. domination, rather than with drafting a pathway to a future leading to a common understanding of shared human complexity. Drawing on future collectivity, Chi Chi Shi critically asks about the agency: “How can subjects negotiate their desire for recognition with the necessity of transforming what it means to be recognised?” I propose it is precisely the transformative aspect of artistic practice that is both resisted and fet-

15 Chi Chi Shi (2018), “*Defining My Own Oppression: The Neoliberalism and the Demands of Victimhood*”, *Historical Materialism*, 26 (4).

ishized within the neoliberal model in culture. Recognition without transforming what it means to be recognised is like diversity and inclusion without social justice.

To Poland, I would be returning as the first performing artist to identify as HIV positive I know of. While asking around who would present my work, I had found myself quickly re-drawing the map of potential allies. Disappointments and unexpected surprises. Who would support HIV-related performance was a painful exercise. Hurting from rejection, at times I would no longer be able to distinguish between myself and HIV.

On the other hand, in the world of HIV response my performance work felt out of place. I was an empowered patient who happens to be very artistic and philosophical. And that's not easily measurable when you speak to workers from diagnostic centres, scientific researchers or those speaking in languages of advocacy and mobilisation. This is why I think my practice in the recent years turned towards queer pedagogy and artistic research – another reorientation – where I am in consideration of co-creating conditions to live and work together with others instead of trying to fit in. I have come to accept and recognize living and becoming with HIV as partial identity. To close this section, I would like to offer words by Chi Chi Shi, to meditate on collective and individual beyond the neoliberal conditioning:

The 'we' that engages in collective action is not a pre-existing object but is created in the course of acting. To challenge the foreclosure of collective identity is to re-

open the relationship between the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective, in a way that neoliberalism has purportedly excluded. The invisible universal of an unembodied agent and the visible particular that demands recognition are the multiplicity of the potential human.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Doing theatre in a (gay after) queer way: In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities

Aforementioned notions of orientation and disorientation, as part of the Ahmedian queer phenomenology toolbox, can too be considered as strategies of choice for queer theatre and performance makers. It is not to say that any unconventional attitude towards, for example, theatrical set-up is instantly a queer one. Nor is it fortunate to equate *experimental* with *progressive*<sup>17</sup>; the proliferation of forms of artistic expression in late capitalism is an obvious observation to make. Moreover, there is also a heightened awareness of art-like products and related phenomena such as *greenwashing* or *pinkwashing*. We are attempting to quit “straight theatre” thinking, remember?

In my understanding, *something else* is happening when queerness is part of the mix, or is one of the departure points in the politics of creation. When presenting her associations with queer performativity (and shame), Eve Kosofsky Segwick doubted whether there is anything

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren F (2022), *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, The Mit Press, p. 52.

that differentiates them from features of all performativity. However, what appears are “the *torsions* or aberrances between reference and performativity, or indeed between queerness and other ways of experiencing identity and desire”<sup>18</sup>. Doing theatre in a queer way can be about experiencing bodies present in the room, their materiality and how they take up space, and bodies evoked in numerous ways through the content of the work. Queering can take the form of playing with the address implicitly or explicitly. Who is seen and by whom? Some artists would propose direct, welcoming gestures to recognize varied gender identifications and expressions in the room, others could problematise the position, role, identity or gaze of a spectator in the work through dramaturgical choices. Another approach could be about self-presentation, chosen aesthetic or references that may point to specific experiences, communities or scenes. Similarly to Sedgwick, I find it counterproductive to discern whether particular artistic practices and strategies *are* queer or not, instead I prefer to focus on ways queerness manifests itself in theatre and what happens *then*. Here, I am also driven by questions we practise within the practical research project into queer performance pedagogy and feedback, *In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities* (IPOP)<sup>19</sup> which is also discussed in detail by my colleague Elio Steffen in her essay for this volume.

18 Kosofsky Sedgwick, E (1993), “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*”, *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1(1).

19 Bi-vocally developed and artistically coordinated with Elio Steffen since 2021.

How is this work of art/performance/  
theatre piece *queer*?  
What is *queer* about it?

Inquiry into the legibility of a queer performance is misguided if an air of objectivity is involved. With nearly three decades of queerness and its academic institutionalisation (at least in the Anglo-Saxon context), there is a growing body of scholarship that critically nuances a variety of genealogies of queer performance (Tavia Nyong’o, Amelia Jones, among others). Queer and trans performance practitioners may now be more likely than ever before to be celebrated and recognized. Some are having a foothold in major institutions, while some are withdrawing to sub-scenes. A question whether queer performance as such is thriving nowadays would necessitate a deeper and situated research. Nevertheless, I find an argument by Gregg Bordowitz regarding “queer structures of feeling” timely and useful in approaching the idea of the legibility of queer performance. As he puts it in the collection of essays *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous*: “A particular work is queer if it is viewed as queer, either by queers or bigots.”<sup>20</sup> Within our work at IPOP we have been struck by the realisation that at times, our task as queer pedagogues working alongside intentional peer-community of LGBTQ+ identifying artists in Amsterdam, is simply to offer conditions where a particular artistic proposal is being held by the group as queer or trans. Nurturing

20 Bordowitz, G (1993), “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous” in: *Queer Looks: Perspective on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gevers, John Greyson, Pratibha Parmar. Between the Lines, p.211

and affirming each other's midway, vulnerable creations in a communal setting would be no less, if not more relevant than offering direct feedback.

Through my ruminations on positioning and becoming (HIV positive), queer theatre and "straight theatre", disorientation and reorientation I have been drawing a conceptual map for myself to articulate how I came to understand and have been practising "doing theatre in a queer way". Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier when setting an intention to a general desire behind their rich volume entitled "Queer dramaturgies", proposed to rephrase Nikolaus Müller-Schöll's idea of "doing theatre in a political way" so as to examine "doing theatre *in a queer way*" in various international contexts. This particular chain of reference leads back to Jean Luc Godard's distinction on political films that accept the given frame of representation and films that are produced in a political way, where the very frame that makes the film itself is in question<sup>21</sup>.

In this last part, I would like to dwell on the queer theatre making/dramaturgical practice I am developing and to think along the idea of doing theatre *queerly*. At the beginning of this text, I pointed to Richard Ford's proposal behind "a decision to be queer". While emerging out of the lockdown phase of the pandemic, resuming in-person activities and travel, I would begin to reexamine my professional ties to the Polish theatre scene, enriched by the experiences from my artistic and activist

21 S Farries, S, Alyson Campbell (2016), *Queer Dramaturgies. International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 15

engagements with HIV. I have acknowledged my personal process as post-traumatic growth, my transformation after trauma felt almost complete. Then, embracing my own queerness during the pandemic was "reorienting by disorienting kind of experience", as my partner Willem would put it, while they supported me during the writing of this text. Not knowing Ford's notion then, I am now aware I have taken it pretty much literally in terms of my professional trajectory. When in Poland, I will have decided to focus on working with (and supporting) fellow queers about queer experiences and issues they wanted to speak about. I even started to conversationally address this personal as much as professional project as "my own LGBTQ+ agenda".

My sense of individual agency has been clearly informed by being anchored in the Netherlands. When in Poland, I was there on my own terms – contrary to my collaborators for whom it was not a viable option – I was able to leave the country anytime. This is also to observe an experience of returning to a native place as a guest, familiar and estranged one. Likely, this is an instance of the next generation of queer (I'd underline its white working class aspect) mobility, one following a movement from rural to urban areas studied by Dider Eribon in the second half of XXth century<sup>22</sup>: to migrate from a city in the queer-phobic country of origin to one of the top-equality scoring countries of the richer West. Places literally soaked in "LGBT ideology" or "rainbow propaganda" (pick your

22 Eribon, D (2004) *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, Duke University Press.

favourite) as Polish, Hungarian or Russian ruling class and conservatives would put it. However, admittedly, I left in 2016 to pursue my studies, right before queerphobic and transphobic discourse would become so present. So I find myself next performing a split as an artist operating between Poland and the Netherlands in the context of a developing, radicalised politicalization of LGBTQ+ people. I would become a transmitter of trendy ideas and rightful attitudes, I'd be seen as a brave messenger from an idealised land of social progress, I would be the lucky one who did leave, I'd become ignorant for either side. I would carry some nostalgia and some counterfeit with me, too.

These tensions have been both productive and somewhat defining for the two theatrical projects from “my LGBTQ+ agenda”. Both works were developed in 2022 with Wojtek Rodak, a student of theatre directing, collaborator, fellow queer traveller. We worked as a director-dramaturg duet and gave a Polish premiere of Canadian play Marc Michel Bouchard's *Tom at the Farm* in TR Warszawa and then co-directed and co-scripted queer performance with LGBTQ+ young adults, entitled *Kolorowe sny* [“Colourful Dreams/”Dreaming in Colour”] in Teatr Polski [Polish Theatre] in my hometown, Poznań. A number of supporting questions would arise while working on these performances:

*Can practising queer dramaturgy be thought of as a contribution towards queer activism? How can I practise my queerness with others and in relation to others? Where and with whom exactly? What is queer about*

*my values? How to manage the interlocalities of different queernesses? How to be queer in the peripheries without looking up to the centre too much?*

We have been devising a Polish staging of *Tom at the Farm* within the criteria of “straight theatre”. A play by Marc Michel Bouchard is a handsome, well-made piece for a quartet of actors of two genders. It centres a gay protagonist from a big town whose beloved just died in a tragic bike accident. He ventures to a far away milk farm, to the village where his partner grew up, escaped from and where he is now going to be buried. Family of the deceased misrecognized Tom as a friend. Someone else, someone female would be interpellated with the right to grief as the crux of this drama in “twelve images”. During our rehearsal process, in a digital meeting with Bouchard, the author disclosed that this fabular construction was based on the lived experience of one of his friends. A man was denied the inheritance of his late, life-long partner. Although Bouchard's strategy is not explicitly autofictional, we have mobilised a rehearsal process around personal accounts of grief, about experiencing loss and restrictions in mourning over our queer friends, and spoke about our shared grievances for being raised gay in Poland.

With staging *Tom at the Farm* we spoke of doing theatre in a “gay after queer” sort of way. This is to say that the play – which developed in early 2010s by a gay writer of an older generation, who witnessed a new era of gays and lesbians acquiring civic rights in Canada – is not

in line with our lived experience and a current momentum of queer culture at large in the 2020s. Polish society, regardless of how resistant it is to a political inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, is undergoing a tectonic, Z-generational shift, which results in, among others perceived changes, an increased visibility of non-binary, genderfluid and trans folks. Contemporary political representation in theatre in a country where LGBTQ+ movements and queer political activism only took off “for real” recently, is a good example of the way in which the liberal idea of progress is not necessarily a teleological process. By doing theatre in a “gay after queer” way, I mean working from the conviction that – even without being inscribed in the law as “the new normal” – white cis gay men wield more access to visibility, resources for expression and (auto)representation than anyone else in the alphabet. It is also an operative assumption that we cannot speak today of homophobia without mentioning transphobia, queerphobia, racism and ableism. My last argument in this regard is that we should strive for an expansion of the ways that LGBTQ+ experiences are represented: to look for the complexity in narratives and embodiments onstage that no longer capture us as dehumanised, victimised and powerless.

In the case of *Tom at the Farm*<sup>23</sup> we made two interventions in this direction. Firstly, in agreement with the author, based on the motif of a (fictional) gay memoir in the play, we superimposed a broader selection of Polish LGBTQ+ testimonies (autofictional), consensually

acquired from its editors and authors<sup>23</sup>. These texts are read from sight, directly from the book in which they were published. Rounding a thousand pages volume with its sheer materiality speaks of the gravity of its contents. In its size, the book may too be mistaken for a Bible. The reading performance of the testimonials by Maria Maj, who is playing the role of the mother of the deceased suspends the action of the play temporarily. Interestingly, Maria who is undoubtedly, and publicly in allyship to LGBTQ+ people, was initially very reserved about this artistic choice: thinking that the realm of the fiction would have been sufficient enough to convey the author’s point. As makers, we observed her visible resistance to performing the reading as one that colours the interpretation of the material, standing in the way of emotional access to it. With time, we realised that we proposed this material onstage way too late for Maria to reconcile it with her own artistic process (even if these fragments were introduced at the very beginning of the rehearsal process and they somehow haunted this work). Later, Maria changed her mind and her performance of reading reminds her of her personal, externalised kind of allyship. This particular scene is like a test for the audience. Observing the crowd numerous times, assuming as little as possible, I would see clearly that this one *is* for the queers. We cry when we hear stories so intimately close to ours and so rarely voiced in public. It would be the straights who would complain

<sup>23</sup> *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie. Świadcstwa, relacje, pamiętniki osób LGBTQ+ w Polsce, (2022) ed. Julia Bednarek, Piotr Laskowski, Sebastian Matuszewski, Łukasz Mikołajewski, Michał Sobczak, Karakter, Kraków.*

about the artistic choices (that were not theirs to make) instead of being there to listen. Two months after the premiere of *Tom...* we were invited to stage a public performative reading of the testimonies as part of Warsaw Pride celebrations. Notably, the event was initiated and funded through the bureau of a mayor of the Warsaw-Center district, which proves the liberal and pro-European direction of the authorities of Polish biggest cities<sup>24</sup>. The reading this time was a collective performance, a number of invited LGBTQ+ professional actors were joined by some of the authors from the anthology<sup>25</sup>.

The second gesture has to do with the play's original finale that leaves room for interpretation. Tom is about to repeat a violent act of disfiguration, the same act that the brother of the deceased committed towards the first lover of his younger sibling in the past. Whether it happens and how is up to the makers<sup>26</sup>. Our decision with Wojtek was to make it clear that Tom will not be another instance of a gay victim in the play. In the end, in our rendering, he kills the deceased's brother with a shovel in the back of the stage, and right after that he dances in front of the audience with a self-liberatory twist to a song by Canadian artist Orville Peck called "Turn to Hate"<sup>27</sup> before turning off the light. Revisiting this particular scene

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24 It is worthwhile to think of this example in connection to the ongoing debate on "LGBT free zones" and successful endeavours of queer activist from the "Atlas of Hate" project, whose work lead to European Commission freezing funding projects for areas who took up anti-gay resolutions.

25 Documentation available [here](#).

26 In adapted for cinema version of the play, directed by Xavier Dolan (2013), the titular character manages to escape the farm and the viewer is left to imagine what really has happened to the brother or to the character of Sara who was pretending to be the girlfriend of the deceased.

27 Youtube link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR-4l5M\\_MQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR-4l5M_MQ8)

reminds me of a certain drawback of "straight theatre": its normativizing, psychological convention. Bouchard's play with all of its complexity, and in-depth portrayal of grief uses – after all – classical, recognized literary tropes to paint, this time, a gay perspective to be valid like any other. The play is not a call to action, nor does it offer a language for a queer grief, queer militancy or queer justice. I felt that our end choice to make the killing of the brother known without the repetition of this particular facial disfiguration was a way to avoid its homophobic register, yet what emerges is a figure of a Gay Avenger. I prefer to think that Tom kills to survive. The killing of the one who looks like the love object (the shadowy twin of the love object) could also signify a step towards acceptance, the very last stage of grief. It is this figurative way of resolving the Bouchardian psychological knot that allows Tom to move on.

In the reading I am proposing for our adaptation of the play, what is being "killed" in fact is (familial) homophobia. Even the character of the mother, in this rendition carried out with the utmost attention, eventually releases herself from the kinship to her violent son. I was particularly driven by a notion of gay sensibility proposed by Walt Odets, which describes the "man's internal experience of himself, and his characteristic external expression of self to others"<sup>28</sup>. These two aspects constitute a "sensibility" that is often different from that of heterosexual men as Odets would put it. Understanding homophobia as

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28 Odets, W (2019) *Out of the Shadows: Reimagining Gay Men's Lived*, Penguin, p. 40

social pathology is a powerful contribution that I wanted to convey from Sarah Schulman in her “Ties that Bind”. With it, next to Guy Hocquenghem’s canonical text on “The Homosexual Desire” (spoiler alert: there is no such thing, there is just “desire”) I armed myself to unpack Bouchard’s play in the Polish context.

However, when adapting the play for a public theatre in Warsaw, I found it tricky to address its homonormative dimension. I have considered this text from the start as a product of a gay sensibility that differs from current Polish socio-political reality. It is an example of cultural production that still feels aspirational from the perspective of the post-soviet side of the European Union. In my observation, only the (liberal, cultural, political, financial) elites in Poland can live out their Western-like homonormative fantasy without having to leave the country (think of neoliberalism, class, inequality divisions, political oppression). There is a critical potential in exploring grief from a gay perspective through Bouchard, and gay shame as in working-class upward mobility through the novels of Édouard Louis staged in Poland by female-identifying directors, because it reminds us that such voices have not emerged much from Polish literature. Especially in the French speaking-world, we can trace a long lineage of gay-male writing. Except for the number of singular Polish gay authors like Witold Gombrowicz, Miron Białoszewski and most recently Edward Pasewicz and Jacek Dehnel, it is only in recent years that LGBTQ+ perspectives in Polish literature have been given more prominence thanks to the transhistorical antholo-

gy Disorientations’(2022). This is why I have reservations whenever Polish theatre directors choose to import texts that have already resonated in the West, starting from seminal rendition of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* by Krzysztof Warlikowski (2007), Anna Smolar’s *The End of Eddy* (2020), to the most recent staging Paul Preciado’s *Apartment on Uranus* (2022) by Michał Borczuch.

Our *Tom at the Farm*’ – with the two previously described interventions of multiplying testimonies of Polish contemporary LGBTQ+ people and the figure of the Gay Avenger – is after all not much different from other theatrical examples. It is still wrapped up in an institutional fold of Polish “straight theatre”: the conventional, text-based and organised around permanently employed acting ensemble. In the end, in times of homonormativity without equality, we made a solid piece of “straight theatre” with a twist of gay sensibility, one that is arising among the queer awakening in the country.

My experience with devising the following performance with Wojtek was significantly different. *Kolorowe sny* that premiered in Teatr Polski in Poznań<sup>29</sup> in December 2022 was from the beginning imagined to be a co-production of a local public theatre with Stonewall Group, a Poznań-based association fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ+ people, which also has its commercial outlets, such as a hostel, mental and sexual health clinic and a popular bar called Lokum. To this constellation we invited a third party to cooperate: a queer media and

<sup>29</sup> This is also another instance of direct funding of the LGBTQ+ culture by the local municipality, which can again speak of political atmosphere in the traditionally more West-leaning city of Poznań.

culture collective-platform called pozqueer who brought their expertise on practising safer space and nonviolent communication. We were given creative freedom in proposing a performance that involves LGBTQ+ young adults from the town and its vicinity.

Explicit partnership with LGBTQ+ oriented organisations and promoters allowed us to both establish and legitimise this production as a queer production. By “queer production” I mean in this case a theatrical performance which holds its address not within the “general public”, but with the multiplicity of people and identities behind the LGBTQ+ abbreviation. To make a queer production is to showcase a variety of queer lived experiences in the language of theatre while holding critical awareness of how an act of representation is conveyed – without the stink of universality. In the essay “Operative Assumptions”, Bordowitz writes that the “general public” is “a fiction established to organise consumers around purchasing products”.<sup>30</sup> If I apply his observations on television and advertising to theatre, it is easy to observe that audiences are not homogenous, but people in the auditoriums are often addressed as such. There is a danger that if we are being treated like we are all the same, many people will come to believe this, and expect this of others<sup>31</sup>. However, I find it rather subversive, at least in Poland, to address the LGBTQ+ community as “the target audience” of the performance through artistic means, at least. Let me explain

30 Bordowitz, G (1993), “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous” in: *Queer Looks: Perspective on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gever, John Greyson, Pratibha Parmar. Between the Lines.

31 <https://medialectic.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/operative-assumptions-gregg-bordowitz/>

this further. Even if I am of influence in how the work is being presented through the PR channels of the theatre as a maker, I do not hold this responsibility. I am not remunerated for it. Performing arts centres, such as public theatres, have their own (mostly neoliberal) ideology and communication styles. At best, a queer production can and probably should problematize and challenge practices that are normative and normativizing. An experience of working on *Kolorowe sny* has been one of learning by doing in terms of communication. Clearly, the institution that hosted our production did not own an expertise on how to actually present and market LGBTQ+ work. Employees relied on preferences expressed by the creative team and input from pozqueer. and Stonewall. They intended no harm, they stated whenever they felt incompetent and often double-checked the proposed content with us before distributing it. But how to incentivize public culture workers to familiarise themselves with queer culture in a way that is not extractive, but actively supports the needs of LGBTQ+ communities? More progressively declared public theatres in Poland have championed virtue signalling and performative activism<sup>32</sup> to increase their social capital and relevance to liberal audiences, rather than being committed to a cause, and therefore in a position to be transformed in relation to it.

I can name a chilling example of performative activism from Teatr Studio where I worked for two seasons as a dramaturg, from 2020 to 2022. Chilling – be-

32 <https://www.bmc.org/glossary-culture-transformation/performative-activism>

cause it involved my queer self seeing a rainbow coloured banner on a magnificent Palace of Culture and Sciences in Warsaw where the theatre is located, with a text performatively announcing “The End of Violence” [“KONIEC PRZEMOCY”]. I am not sure whether this banner was adjacent to the promotional campaign of the aforementioned *The End of Eddy* or whether it was a statement of values professed in this institution. In any case, it is difficult to read this statement apart from the anti-LGBTQ+ right wing campaigns, epitomised by two violent events: the arrest of non-binary activist Margot in Warsaw in the summer of 2020 (arrests and police brutality towards other activists); and the Pride March in Białystok in 2019 which was met with open hate and utmost hostility. Reparatively, I could read this banner as a symbolic projection that another future is something that we should demand. A future without violence – enough! – just stop being violent. I cannot help but find this statement ludicrous, ignorant and simply problematic. For me, what it signals is actually an erasure of responsibility. Who is speaking? Who can command that violence to stop? Who is violent and to whom? Can we just be good to each other? One of the reasons I am no longer working for this venue is in fact that as an openly queer and HIV positive person I felt that my contributions, informed by these perspectives were shunned and discouraged and at times deemed not worthy enough. Circling back to a critical question by Chi Chi Shi, my very desire for recognition (and what follows it) was denied on numerous occasions. Interestingly, some of my “progressive” ideas made it to

the official plans of the institution as part of the coming multi-year program (which contributed to securing the management of the venue its next term), but there was no place for me and what I embody there anymore. I felt strongly that in this particular institutional context, with its power asymmetries, its post-soviet legacies and internalised rampant neoliberalism and elitism, I cannot find space and nourishment to practise my queerness without getting hurt. If the subject cannot negotiate, what is left is to quit that “straight theatre”.

#### 4. Doing theatre in a queer way

To be able to come back to the idea and practice behind doing theatre in a queer way it felt necessary to sketch out, however briefly, the institutional framework of producing theatre in Poland in relation to LGBTQ+ issues (albeit without engaging in a complex conversation regarding accessibility needs for example) before moving to the core interests of this article. My answer to the question of how we can do theatre in a queer way lies in how we approach production, artistic and social process of devising theatre in relation to posed and practised values. To organise my thinking, I would like to follow a conceptual triad posed by the scenography and trans performance scholar, Rachel Hann<sup>33</sup>. In my understanding of her proposal, adapted for the purpose of auto-analysing

<sup>33</sup> Thanks to Carly Everaert for pointing me to Rachel Hann's work. Hann published a brief manifesto on the future of performance on 15 November 2019 on her personal Facebook account, inspired by Tanja Beer's production model for ecoscenography, among others.

the process of making of the *Kolorowe sny*, a conventional order of pre-production, production and post-production is substituted with the following: co-creation, celebration and contribution.

*Co-creation* is about the process of being/making with/for. In the case of *Kolorowe sny* seven queer and trans young adults invited through an open call and introductory workshop were joined by two actors and a creative team, including a safer space facilitator (Dagmara Torłop from [pozqueer](#).) The social process behind this project was explicit in creating a space for queer and trans expression and sociality that differs from school and from home. Theatre in my understanding was to serve as a third space, both as a space of becoming and as a space for transformation. Here, theatre connotes a literal site as well as the interpersonal and material exchanges that come with occupying that site. Social process, in the case of a performance with and by queer and trans people, was for all of us an opportunity for an intergenerational transmission of queer experience. As Millennial generation gay/queer identifying artists, Wojtek and I wanted to convey the process as a platform towards queer adulthood for the Z generation that we ourselves did not have. Importantly, our role was also not to project our nostalgia nor to patronise the participants but to listen, support, and empower people younger than us. One of the crucial practices for establishing both the artistic and social processes was an act of collaborative contract making. We workshopped such questions as: How do we want to work together? How do we want to live together?

What do we want to create together? Through this document, signed by everyone participating in the production, including the stage manager who was to look over its execution, respective parties could express desires, needs, goals, values, access and communication needs. Our “colourful contract” enumerated responsibilities and constraints within particular roles. For example, as directors of the performance we expressed our limitations in supporting private matters of the participants, reserved the right to be wrong and underlined our own ignorance – as everyone else, we too are in the process. The contract was a consensual and willingly signed document. It also contained cues on how to state personal (and physical) boundaries. The right to say “no” was also stretched to the question of individual contributions and authorship. As we worked with lived/personal experience as a performative material, our collaborators could then withdraw, replace, redo or resign from their offerings. Within the social aspect, we practised our check-in and check-out rituals in order to be intentional and present in shared space. Co-creation in such a process can be seen as an artistic strategy that holds space for multiple agencies. What will be made, would not happen without every single person involved. It is worthwhile to point out that co-creation is not about nullifying or challenging hierarchy in this case. It is rather to make hierarchies, obligations and aspirations as visible and transparent as possible in order to negotiate and transform the set conditions if necessary. I would like to note that no social and artistic process is free of conflict, violence, miscommunication and misunderstanding.

In *Kolorowe sny*, we experienced a challenging and hurtful instance of internalised homophobia externalised onto one of the team members in the stressful period before the premiere. The situation was handled through a practice of an accountability circle, resourced from the toolbox of transformative justice. This situation was painful and I do not want to downplay its complexity and ignore the damage it caused to the person harmed. What was important to me was that the conditions for repair were brought to the table and the contract we signed all together served to call out unwanted behaviour and to take action. This particular moment of crisis additionally revealed the precarity of making a queer production in the “straight theatre”, as the situation unfolded in the moment of a collective and laborious preparation of the set design. We vividly experienced a lack of sufficient support in this production and repeatedly felt like a second priority to the success-driven management of the venue. This is not to point out bad intentions, but rather to the systematic lack of care and indifference to the issues around unpaid labour. The above problems have been addressed and fed back to people bearing responsibilities.

*Celebration* is to be joyful and queer and seen. To be held and to be heard. Thinking of performance as celebration invites us to approach the final outcome shared with an audience as something we are proud of. Something that we were capable of. Something we felt is enough. Celebration in the context of queer performance is to celebrate each other on both sides of the stage, invit-

ing a queer gaze in as a healing gaze, as dragtivist, pedagogue and friend Taka Taka would say.

*This is how I want you to see me* would be one of my core prompts to performers in the piece. In devising material for stage, I suggested to the queer and trans cast that beyond their own uniqueness and complexity, there may be a degree of identification with their particular experiences from the audience members. Someone out there could also have had a homophobic parent or a transphobic sister. Someone out there could also be in the process of transition. In sculpting with them their performances of auto-representation I was making them sensitive to the theatrical frame which captures lived experiences as representations. For someone in the audience they may become a representation of a lesbian or a non-binary person, even if we are stressing that we are here “on our own terms”. However, it is also potentially empowering for them to speak on stage, not as role models but as someone akin to others and with whom they could relate. And perhaps such spectators could also imagine themselves taking the stage. Additionally, while working with trans and non-binary performers it was important for me to keep problematizing and addressing my own cis-ness as potentially standing in the way of their self outlook. Here, I found it useful to dwell on my embodied experience of becoming HIV positive – finding affinity and empathy with our trans performers navigating both healthcare as well as societal reservations and preconceptions around their bodies and lives.

Lastly, *contribution* is to be regarded as something that is given in-communality. It is precious and valuable in relation to others. It is thought in defiance of capitalistic (or neoliberal by extension) production of value. It is not about making an achievement, and with queer production in mind, it is to resign from the desire to innovate or keep up with the progressive pipeline. With *Kolorowe sny*, I see it as a contribution to enrich the lives of everyone in the process personally, hoping that this performance as an experience touches their close ones and the communities they are otherwise part of, not to mention individual audience members. Having in mind artistic and social process our contribution is a gesture towards queer sociality through the medium of theatre. From a pedagogical perspective, contributing to a theatrical site as a space of becoming is to allow growth and change on a personal, and maybe then on a societal level. Theatre here would be an intermediary space, where the performance of an identity or gender can be tried out and rehearsed; looked after, cared for by others, held and affirmed by the group.

In this context, I find it relevant to note the journey of our two trans performers: each of whom was barely 6 months into the process of starting to transition when we started up a rehearsal process together. One of them wore high-heels for the very first time that particular day, and a second person kept us updated on their required transition psychological assessments. We all waited for his first hormone injections and cheered when it happened after the premiere. Contribution is also about what you

can give and what you take. Through our rehearsal process we encouraged reciprocity in devising prompts for everyone to offer their knowledge to others through skill-sharing or experience-based sharing. So the lessons we gave to one another were both intentional and prepared with the time set aside, and they were also spontaneous, interpersonal. In devising queer production, I found a new outlook on the resources available at the “straight theatre”. Public theatre institutions maintain to an extent an employment of secondary staff who are necessary for each evening of theatre to go through. Through our production we forged relationships with in-house make-up artists who generously shared their knowledge, skills and tips with our performers experimenting with their gender expression and performance in their daily life. The support of the workers positively influenced the personal and the fictional realm reiterated on stage.

The contribution of queer production to the “straight theatre” context (the work mainly produced and distributed by Teatr Polski) is also about setting its own conditions and boundaries. The safer space facilitator, Dagmara created an alternative signage system, including stickers that overruled gendering of the toilets in the venue. For the duration of our performance presentations these rules were temporarily in place. Dagmara additionally trained audience management workers in first response and support for people who could have found our performance triggering. The performance itself starts with collectively recorded access information about behaviour in the space, rules of being together and the

vulnerabilities of our performers who are about to take the stage. This work, similarly to queer-minded nightlife, prioritised people from the LGBTQ+ community, unapologetically. *Kolorowe sny* was additionally charged by a political momentum regarding the ongoing politicisation of schooling in Poland. In a way, our performers were giving a masterclass on what it is like to be a young queer, non-binary and trans person in Poland in the present moment. In fact, the performative materials we devised together, based on their lived experience, can be considered as manuals that are shared generously with the audience members. Usually these blueprints had been implicitly or explicitly addressed to, among others, a parent, teacher, peer, doctor, university chancellor.

I see this contribution – thinking through enacting conditions for a queer performance – as posing an alternative to the implicit and unchallenged conditions of presenting and producing in conventional theatre. Queer identifying makers may often find themselves expecting the preexisting structures to be practically on the same page as them in terms of equity and inclusion. That is still rarely the case and so the weight of communication and education may be assumed as a responsibility of the individual artist(s) entering a particular institutional setup. In the example of *Kolorowe sny* we attempted to create and maintain a space in the theatre for and by queer and trans people. From the collective act of inhabiting the venue, we could begin to discern how this structure can really serve us or not, and to enact creative boundaries to ensure the way we *need* to be.

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# Outside the Fire Light, Queer abundance in IPOP's Feedback Session

*Elia Steffen*

## Introduction: Looking for Otherwise

Queerness is the poetics of abundance. This is no totalizing definition. Queerness is antithetical to rigid definitions. Instead, this is a dust mote in the fertile field of the undefined. By poetics I suggest a kind of flow, a movement of performativity, of doing, and meaning. Queerness offers precision in and maybe through the undefinable, incoherent, the odd, or, dare I say, *queer*. Abundance overflows the boundaries and courses set for it. It pushes beyond, demands and carves space for, over and over, things we are told could never be, must never be. It is glorious, monstrous, abject, and other. It is the possibility of more than we have been taught is possible to even imagine is possible.

This is where I find myself as I consider the first year of *In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities, Queer Performance Pedagogy and Feedback* [IPOP], an educational artistic research project founded by Szymon Adamczak and myself within the Academy of Theatre and Dance [ATD] in Amsterdam. IPOP was created to respond to limited, disjointed queer educational resources within the ATD.

One of six academies of Amsterdam University of the Arts, the ATD attracts a large mix of Dutch and international students. Within the Dutch system of higher education, the ATD is a “hogeschool,” best translated into US educational system as *college* or *vocational school*, which offers Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees for those who wish to become professional, working artists.

As such IPOP primarily draws people who identify as artistic makers of some kind.

It is important to acknowledge that several queer pedagogical efforts were at play in the ATD when we began IPOP. Carly Everaert's class "Radical Thinking" (Scenography Department) and the curriculum of the School for New Dance Development (SNDO), including the work of Joy Mariama Smith, Aster Arribas, and the "Thinking through Gender" block. However, as we looked at these opportunities, we saw queerness being siloed in specific classes and departments.

IPOP attempts to bring queer pedagogical principles to the whole school, and to connect queer people and ideas from various departments. The program was designed to sit between departments, fostering collaboration and cross-pollination including between the Master's and Bachelor's programs. Although some departments are more represented than others, there have been participants from 12 departments of the ATD as well as several outside universities in the Netherlands and abroad<sup>1</sup>.

IPOP's first year was made up of three main elements. "Research Assemblies" were a way of exploring queer theory through various reading practices. "Practical Workshops" invited teaching artists engaged with queer art making to offer workshops. For the practice "Feed-

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<sup>1</sup> IPOP has had participants (including current students, alum, teachers and staff) from DAS Theatre, DAS Choreography, DAS Creative Producing, THIRD, School for New Dance Development, Expanded Contemporary Dance, Theatre Directing, Scenography, Mime, Theatre in Education, DAS Research and the Social Justice and Diversity in the Arts research group as well as current and past students from Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Utrecht School of the Arts, Maastricht University, Utrecht University.

back Sessions", we gathered a cohort of eight artists and researchers to explore queer performance feedback<sup>2</sup>.

Within this structure, IPOP posed two main research questions. One, how can the ATD, and universities more broadly, better support LGBTQ+ students including their well-being, artistic growth, and education development? In IPOP, these issues of development are understood within an analysis of normativity, by which we mean to invoke the interlocking systems of control bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1997), and their mutually reinforcing mechanism of conformity<sup>3</sup>. Within these structures, development is predicated on increasing the ability of students to access capital within the art market. This might include notions of personal productivity, quality art, and learning particular forms of research and articulation. IPOP does not scorn these understandings of improvement. However, we seek to hold room for queer constellations of personal and collective development, which may or may not function well within capitalist educational and artistic systems.

The second question was about the curriculum. How can the ATD and other institutions of higher learning incorporate queer artists, and thinkers with their practices, theories and histories, into the pedagogy and what can queer ways of thinking and being offer to artistic education generally? How might universities make space for queerness to challenge normative ideas

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed exploration of IPOP programme please see our website at [www.atd.ahk.nl/das-research/projects/ipop/](http://www.atd.ahk.nl/das-research/projects/ipop/)

<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and its pressure for conformity, see Morales' examination of the relationship between colonialism and education in western pedagogies.

of success, growth and learning? How can queer ways of making, knowledge sharing and relating improve and problematize educational goals and outcomes?

For its pilot year, IPOP took on artistic feedback. This came out of our personal experiences within the DAS Theatre Master's program, with its focus on its feedback method. The DAS Arts Method, as their system is called, is an artistic feedback protocol that has had a significant influence both locally and throughout Europe. IPOP is indebted to DAS Theatre and its method. It has served as a valuable jumping-off point, and we understand our own explorations in conversation with it. For IPOP we were interested in building an approach to feedback that was both more flexible and personal than the DAS Arts Method as well as putting more attention on clearly articulating the underlying assumptions and politics at play.

Feedback also made sense as a place to start, since it plays such a prominent role in many artistic pedagogies within Western educational systems. Feedback is also the site of much harm, when it comes to queer students and makers, where straight values, expectations or knowledge systems are often imposed onto queer art. This is true of many artists, who work from perspectives outside the mainstream, and includes demands that performances be easily understandable to "all", that the art conforms to mainstream morals, especially around sexuality, and not to mention outright discrimination on the part of teachers and classmates. Feedback is also of great interest to many artists and organizations outside of pedagogical frames. Thus, IPOP's focus on feedback is a way to

both address some of the deficiencies within performance education, and to bring together different departments within the ATD and students with institutions outside the university.

Some questions we raised included what kinds of techniques and approaches best facilitate useful critique for queer performance? How do spaces, groups and pedagogies need to be designed to promote the development of LGBTQ+ artists? What does it mean to "queer" feedback, and how can queer feedbacking principles and techniques support performance pedagogies?

### **Into the Queer Wide Open, Theory and Methodology**

There were several key methodologies we used to conduct this investigation. These included anti-identitarian belonging, queer abundance, varying levels of commitment, horizontal gathering and welcoming challenges and disagreements.

Instead of imposing a rigid definition of what it means to be queer or LGBTQ+, IPOP made a commitment to welcome anyone who *understands their work as in some way queer and/or dealing with LGBTQ+ themes*. This approach manifests a sense of queerness as something one believes and does, rather than something one is and has happen to them. This allowed us to create a space grounded in specifically queer philosophies and LGBTQ+ histories, without having to limit participation to those who fit a particular queer identity based on particular

desires, histories and relationships to violence. Furthermore, although IPOP is for the people connected to ATD, a lack of clear definitions created a porous environment that welcomed people from many different communities, providing their unique insights and perspectives, and strengthening the research outcomes of the project. It is worth noting that many of our participants hold more essentialist definitions of queerness and it is an ongoing topic of discussion within our programs.

Of course, IPOP's lack of definition comes with its own risks and issues. Part of queer abundance is spaces free or at least less beholden to heteronormative expectations and values, not to mention violence. How then to work towards this while allowing in cis-straight people? Of course, this question of how is also important in a space of only LGBTQ+ people, considering the breadth of that category, for example, "homo-normativity" to connote the way many monogamous gay and lesbian relationships reinforce many indictments of heteronormativity<sup>4</sup>. There are also issues of safety. It is assumed LGBTQ+ people are less likely to say or do homo or transphobic things. Such words or actions might be particularly hard to handle in a space that is labeled as queer. However, we know that LGBTQ+ people and spaces are often unsafe for people who fall within the queer umbrella due to issues of misogyny, transphobia, racism, classism, ableism, etc. My point is not to argue that LGBTQ+ only spaces are not safer for LGBTQ+ people, but to point to the highly contingent and problematic nature of this safety, as one reason IPOP

<sup>4</sup> See Alexander Maine 'Queering Marriage: The Homoradical and Anti-Normativity' for more information.

pursues a definitional territory for *queerness* outside of people's sexual desires or gender identity.

Instead, IPOP draws on a lineage of what I call "queer potentiality". This refers to different theories and practices of queerness that resist not only the structures of heteronormativity but LGBTQ+ normative ideologies. Within queer potentiality not only does "normal" not exist but queerness may not either. José Esteban Muñoz famously proclaimed that, "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality (Muñoz, 2009)." Nothing is queer, but we might move towards it.

Although Muñoz puts queerness in the future, drawing on Ashon Crawley's explorations of US Black-pentecostal aesthetics, I am interested in queerness' "otherwise possibilities."

Otherwise, as word—otherwise possibilities, as phrase—announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*. And what *is* is about being, about existence, about ontology. But if infinite alternatives exist, if otherwise possibility is a resource that is never exhausted, what *is*, what exists, is but one of many. Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities. Or, otherwise possibilities exist and the register of imagination, the epistemology through which sensual detection occurs—that is, the way we think the

world—has to be altered in order to get at what’s there [emphasis added] (Crawley, 2017.)

IPOP’s refusal to engage in gatekeeping is embedded in a desire to act, learn, relate to each other towards possibilities outside of heteronormativity’s “prison house [of]...the here and now (Muñoz, 2009.)” To expand our imagination in pursuit of an expansive and multiplicitous queerness beyond or to the side not only of this moment, but of our rationally confined sensual experiences. IPOP’s commitment to pedagogy is rooted in the epistemological project of learning to detect and think queer potentiality.

This queer-beyond is in response to the stifling us/them operating at the heart of heteronormativity. A key operating assumption of Western capitalism is that some people are worthy of life and well-being (“us”), and some are not (“them.”) One way this is determined is through socially constructed ranges of what is considered “normal,” which can also be read as “natural,” “worthy [of life],” “human.” These ranges exist across many different identities and include many physical, behavioral, historic qualifications, for example rigid definitions of queerness based on sexual desire or gender identity. In *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed talks about abjection as a border between the “human” and “non-human” or “monstrous (Creed,1993.)” This distinction for her is not one of homo sapiens and more-than-human, but instead one of who belongs to “us” and who/what does not. Part of IPOP’s refusal of a rigidly defined queerness is

an attempt to situate our work in the space between the human and monstrous, and to wonder what otherwise possibilities we might find there. IPOP does this by not defining a categorical “us” at all, for any such notion creates the same dynamic of “us/them,” “human/abject” that Creed points to. Although this essay proposes and challenges certain understandings of queerness, IPOP has no set definition.

This embrace of the abject and the space between does come with a paradox when we consider the research questions stated above. While IPOP does not have a set definition of queerness, it must be acknowledged that part of how we propose supporting LGBTQ+ students is by challenging the very definitions which distinguish such students from others. This comes with risks of cooption, not to mention that specifically LGBTQ+ issues go unaddressed in pursuit of an intellectualized notion of queerness.

However, we have attempted to make space to address issues affecting LGBTQ+ people in the ATD without surrendering to heteronormative demands for conformity. IPOP does not subscribe to the idea of a single feedback methodology, as is practiced in DAS Theatre, SNDO, and other departments in the ATD, since such systems are inevitably limiting in what kinds of art they can effectively feedback, and what kinds of students can thrive within them. We also prioritize speaking honestly about our program and naming the underlying assumptions, politics and ideologies of its methodologies. IPOP has also had guest speakers and teaching artists, who have

offered challenges to the ways normativity has shown up in our own work while offering practices for living and creating work of queer potentiality<sup>5</sup>. Topics such as drag and the healing potential of the queer gaze, decolonial rituals, critical fabulation, biomythography and disidentification<sup>6</sup> all point to different ways we can become and make beyond the limits of capitalist edicts for normativity, productivity and conformity.

Another aspect of abundance is our attempt to embrace mechanisms for welcoming interested community members, irrespective of their relationship or lack thereof to the institution<sup>7</sup>. This gesture enables us to imagine that, rather than a means for exchange and extraction, universities can become a resource for whole communities. IPOP's relationship to the ATD can overflow the bounds of formal, sanctioned relationships, to serve a population that extends far beyond those who can afford tuition.

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5 For example Dr. Eva Hayward's talk "Trans Eros, Some Practices" at IPOP's *A Symposium on Queer Performance Pedagogy and Feedback*. In this talk Dr. Hayward calls into question universalizing understanding of gender, which invisibilizes transsexual women, especially transsexual women of color. Such a critique could easily be expanded to IPOP's proposals around queer potentiality as a universalizing practice.

6 These concepts all come from the Practical Workshops November 2021– May 2022. Taka Taka discussed their political work as a 'drag-tivist' and drag mom as well as the potential for intentionally queer audiences to offer a restorative gaze to queer performers. Fazlé Shairmahomed invited participants to connect with ancestors and their relationship to colonial histories as well as to make commitments towards decolonization. Kopano Maroga brought their artistic practices based on techniques building new understandings of personal and communal histories and identities. Audre Lorde's idea of biomythography from her acclaimed mytho-autobiographic book *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* is a way of reimagining personal narrative. In "Venus in Two Acts" Saidiya Hartman introduces the notion of "critical fabulation", a method to "jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account (Hartman, 2008)" by filling in where archive is absent in regards to the subjectivity of enslaved Africans in or on the way to the Americas by "imagin(ing) what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done (Ibid)." Disidentification is a concept from José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, exploring the way queer performers, mostly of color, break or disrupt identifications placed on them.

7 For more exploration of the elitism of academic queer studies and proposals for resource sharing among various queer academic and non-academic contexts see Matt Brim's *poor queer STUDIES: confronting elitism in the university*.(SIC)

However, we still exist in a world and an institution that is at times actively hostile to LGBTQ+ people. Examples from the ATD include teachers refusing to respect students' gender or pronouns and required medical examinations which assume only women menstruate. Part of the way IPOP has dealt with the very reasonable need for "queer space" – with its implied [if imperfect] assumptions of safety – was to construct IPOP with varying levels of commitment, which came along with various needs to testify to one's connection to queerness. With all our programmes, you belonged if you said you did. However, with our Research Assemblies people were invited to just show up, whereas with the Feedback Sessions there was an application process that required people to speak to their interests and questions about queerness. The Practical Workshops were somewhere in the middle with a sign-up, but no application. These varying levels of commitment and need to frame oneself as queer allowed IPOP to explore our research with a wide variety of people. It also speaks to the need to create safe[r] spaces for marginalized identities without relying on gatekeeping techniques that exclude people or put the decision-making power of who belongs in the hands of institutions.

Another important methodological approach was what we thought of as "horizontal gathering". This started with the commitment to welcome students, staff and alumni into spaces that did not operate on the normal hierarchies of these positions. All were equally welcome to participate in programmes, get support, and were considered equally capable of offering value to each other and

the research. This offered a unique opportunity for these groups to meet each other as colleagues and fellow artists. This is not to imply a total dissolution of these power dynamics, but was an expression of our commitment to challenging the normative hierarchies built into institutions of higher learning. These attempts at challenging hierarchies were inherited from our time at DAS Theatre with its commitment to acknowledging participants (as DAS Theatre calls those studying there) as working artists and colleagues within the learning environment as well as its responsiveness to the needs and desires of participants.

Part of our methodological approach has been to welcome and foster explorations of the potentially problematic issues that arise within IPOP. We understand our research questions to both reinforce and wrestle with each other. For example, we imagine that integrating queer histories and practice into curriculum has the potential to bolster LGBTQ+ students, while at the same time a strong, vibrant LGBTQ+ student body could be a powerful means for helping institutions of higher learning to take up the lessons of queerness. However, there is also the potential for such changes to undermine LGBTQ+ students. As queer scholars and activists have pointed out many times<sup>8</sup> illegibility is often a key survival and empowerment mechanism at play in living

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<sup>8</sup> See Getsy's "Appearing Differently" for a discussion of problems arising from gay and lesbian artistic representation in the US. See also Muñoz's "Cruising Utopia" chapter "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling, Approaching Kevin Aviance" for further exploration of heteronormative pressures to evidence queerness and its issues.

queerly. Practices that obscure or invisibilize queerness can protect one from suffering heteronormative violence and discrimination, but also prevent the cooption of LGBTQ+ modes of expression as well as maintain safety in queer spaces by keeping behaviors that signify belonging from straight-cis people who may be unsafe. What part of and how queerness should be made legible and usable to institutions of higher learning is an important question at work in IPOP. Another important point of consideration is the potential for colonial extraction of queerness as well as the impact of these systems on people within the ATD and other universities. Uneven distribution of power and resources and issues of race, class, ability, etc. affect how much different LGBTQ+ people can impact and be impacted by these proposals. One key aspect of this is Szymon and my whiteness as it relates to the ways we can access resources based on our queer identities, relying on a definition of queerness we simultaneously seek to challenge. IPOP does not propose to answer any of these questions, but has the commitment to continue to ask them out loud with others. Many of the outside presenters at IPOP have raised questions with some part of our programme or underlying ideology, and we continue to welcome these opportunities to wonder together how to do the work better.

## **To the Heart of the Query: Abundance, Queerness and Feedback**

Bearing in mind these theoretical and methodological frameworks and their challenges, I would like to consider the Feedback Sessions. In November 2021, IPOP put out a call for LGBTQ+ artists interested in engaging with a collective exploration of best practices for feedbacking queer work. We asked people to commit to all four sessions to create a space where people were engaged with and cared about each other and their work. In the end, from within the ATD we selected four students, one teacher and one administrator as well as one student from a different institution in the Netherlands. There were also two people (one student and one outside artist) who were asked to participate as feedbackers, sharing their reflections without presenting their own art.

For each session, two people showed their work and got feedback. Before their presentation, each artist met with one of the co-coordinators to design the session. We often began these talks by asking what questions the artist had about their work, if there were particular things they were trying to figure out, and how they imagined the cohort could be useful. This process built on the DAS Arts Method's exploration of "presenter questions." Then we had a conversation about their experience and training in feedback, asking what they had found useful in the past as well as eliciting their reflections on their ideology when it came to feedback. Finally, we discussed what kinds of experiments in feedbacking they would find interesting.

Together we would then begin to craft the session, pulling from the artist's experience while suggesting techniques or opportunities to experiment from the co-coordinators' eclectic feedback practices. Although each session followed the same basic format, the specific showings took different forms. Some incorporated feedback within the artwork, where the artist and audience discussed the work as part of the performance, while others created situations for the cohort to remold or play with the material of the work.

From these experiments, three ideas emerged for the group as key learnings: 1) draw from everywhere/commit to nowhere, 2) temporary communal ownership and 3) experimentation. The first was the idea that we could pull from many feedback sources without creating a set protocol. The second involved techniques for the feedbackers to experiment with the artwork. The third was a willingness to try out novel methods and accept that some might not work.

IPOP was based on the understanding that all feedback methodologies have underlying ideological assumptions about what constitutes good art and how to achieve it. For example, the DAS Arts Method is based on Socratic philosophy and the power of the expertly crafted question. In IPOP, we approached feedback by asking what kinds of art, socialities, politics and practices do these techniques encourage and discourage? What is and is not possible to do or see within these frames?

We asked people what they needed, how they thought it best to achieve that and what things they would

like to try. This was easier for some than for others, and we struggled at times to move beyond simple methods of the audience sharing their opinion based on questions posed by the artist. However, asking about the artist's needs, how to accomplish them, and what experiment to try were all important to building a committed group engaged with each other's work. First off, people knew that their needs would be prioritized. They would not be asked to subjugate their needs to the restrictive, normalizing demands of a particular feedback protocol. Participants had the freedom to need exactly what they needed and to pursue it the way they thought best. When cohort members attended someone's feedback session, they were not only engaging with the work, but were also contending with and learning about someone's background and experience about how to make work. This was because people understood that whatever techniques were being used had been the choice of the presenting artist based on their ideologies and what they thought would best support their work. This invitation to consider histories and perspectives went both ways. Presenters were asked to think about how the cohort could best support their work, and how their session could expand or deepen the research the group was collectively engaging with.

In addition, we sought to find ways to support individual needs and desires without promoting individualism. One important structural element was to instill collective ownership over the research process. We asked what the cohort members would like to try out and what experiments they would like to do with their presenta-

tion. This was an imperfect process and individual artistic needs took precedence over research objectives during the presentations.

In addition, we utilized and created techniques of temporary collective ownership to find new ways of approaching the work while deprioritizing the vaunted status of the artist-owner common in many feedback techniques. One practice we utilized was "What If..." which had been taught to the coordinators in the context of the DAS Theatre program by theatre maker Edit Kaldor, but had also been used independently by one of the cohort members Noha Ramadan. The basic idea is to offer the artist new ways of approaching their work by suggesting alternative things that could happen in the art. IPOP utilized this technique both as a quick reflection at the end of a session, offering verbal "What if's", and as a more engaged process of demonstrating the "what if" on our feet. In one session, one of the participants, Toni Kritzer, brought various material items of their work and asked people to experiment with different ways of presenting these materials and putting them into action. These experiments in temporary collective ownership deprioritized the status of the author, while also building collective buy-in through experimentation with the work and imaginative engagement with what the work could become.

Not only was experimentation aimed at expanding feedback techniques, but also at developing new ways of relating between artists and feedbackers. The conversations between artist and co-coordinator went beyond what the specific work needed, to engage with questions

of where the artist was in their own development and life. Issues such as being overwhelmed, stressed and having career doubts were as relevant to our conversations as artistic technique, and the experiments that followed took into account the impact they would have on people's personal life as well as artistry and work.

Because the Feedback Sessions were extracurricular activities, with only an extremely modest honorarium, it was clear to everyone that those who showed up chose to do so out of personal desire. Although it would be too far-fetched to say this was always motivated out of a desire to care, the effect was a caring one, which is often hindered by the forced relationality of most academic feedback systems. In these systems, people are most often required to be there, and will suffer financially or scholastically if they are not present. IPOP was able to leverage its lack of coercive mechanisms [due to under-resourcing which has its own problems], in order to generate fields of caring through optional engagement.

These gatherings were also opportunities to work within different feedback paradigms. For example, Ahmed El Gendy's incorporation of feedback into the performance, suggesting a different relationship between maker and audience-critic. Instead of a more traditional relationship where the audience is first the passive receiver and then the giver of opinion, El Gendy's experiment repositioned the audience and their articulated experience as an active participant in the art. Many of the feedback methods in IPOP were experiments of technique but also of relating to the work, each other, the larger systems in which we operate.

## Conclusion: On the Way to There and Then

In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities' first year drew on and sought to create queer abundance. IPOP built structures and theoretical frames to support LGBTQ+ artists within and in the orbit of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam as well as advocating for queer pedagogical practices because of their important offers to performance education broadly. Focusing on research as a key part of many performance education systems IPOP asked two questions: How can we support thriving LGBTQ+ students? How can queer artistic practices, theories and histories be better integrated into curriculums and what can queer ways of thinking and being offer to artistic education?

In the middle of an ongoing research project, IPOP has begun to develop an emergent set of methodological approaches including anti-identitarian belonging, queer abundance, varying levels of commitment, horizontal gathering and welcoming challenges and disagreements. IPOP's Feedback Sessions suggested the possibilities and benefits of performance feedback methodologies that were open in form, prioritizing individual needs and desires over rigid structure. To accomplish this, we made use of a wide range of feedback techniques, striving for conscious engagement with their strengths, limitations and ideologies. IPOP was built around experiments of collective research, and we brought this desire to feedbacking, exploring methods for temporary communal ownership as a process for expanding the potentialities of artistic prac-

tices and works. Throughout the process, we maintained an ethos of experimentation, willing to try new things and jettisoning what wasn't working, while seeing all of it as a means of learning. In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities places faith in expansive queer potentialities, seeking an ongoing process to inhabit and become spaces for living and making otherwise within performance education.

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# Autonomy as a basis for Queer Empowerment in Acting Practises

*Caspar Weimann*

Almost two years ago, in the #ActOut campaign, over 185 well-known actors from German-speaking countries publicly outed themselves as lesbian, gay, bi, trans\*, queer, inter and non-binary, and published a manifesto on representation and casting policies. Among other things, they denounced the fact that they cannot be open about their sexuality or gender identity in their professional lives without having to fear professional disadvantages:

“Until now, we’ve been told that if we revealed certain facets of our identities, namely our sexual and gender identities, we would suddenly lose the ability to portray certain characters and relationships. As if the knowledge of who we are in our private lives would somehow invalidate our ability to convincingly embody roles for the audience.”<sup>1</sup>

This described collective experience of discrimination reveals a defect in the institutional understanding of acting. From it, the following can be concluded: an acting performance was not convincing to the audience when the role was made alive in its emotional complexity and its goals and desires for the world, but when it lived up to the expectations projected onto that role by a cisheteronormative audience. And in these expectations, heterosexual men cannot be flamboyant, women cannot have deep voices, and it is inconceivable that there are people who are neither men nor women.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://act-out.org/en/>

How is it that theaters and casting agencies do not address this defect with the audience, constantly reproduce it, and thus accept the systematic discrimination of queer actors?

### The autonomous actor

There is a widespread and historically developed ideology, in which actors are seen and treated as executors, puppets of a director or an institution. Actors are expected to be able to move as flexibly as possible in the most diverse artistic work situations. They are expected to be physically fit, to be able to speak as many dialects as possible without mistakes, and to be able to function both as part of a military chorus and as free world-builders. This status quo can only exist in an ideology that starts from, is accepted by, and perpetuates a privileged majority, while perpetuating repressive social power relations. In this ideology, one must be a *blank sheet* as an actor, *neutral*. In turn, only normative bodies and identities can be *neutral*, since this *neutrality* is a projection of normative bodies and identities in positions of power and in the audience.

I would like to contrast this concept of the *neutral actor* with the concept of the *autonomous actor*. The *autonomous actor* is someone who is empowered to make decisions about their own identity and experiences independent of direction or agencies, and to use those experiences and identity as the basis for their acting. They individually formulate their own definition of what acting means to them, and are therefore perceived by directors and agencies as an artistic, independent subject.

This actor is not bound by instructions and is explicitly not a *blank sheet*.

### Binary in the theater

A central dimension and perhaps the greatest challenge on the way to acting autonomy is the reappropriation of the interpretative sovereignty over one's own body and what it represents. This is particularly difficult in the theater where repressive body politics prevail. The social construction of a binary of sex and gender, i.e. the unrealistic division of individuals into the categories of man and woman (including the associated attributes and expectations) has been particularly internalized in the theater. The theater is perhaps the last institution to explicitly search for "men" or "women" for its ensembles in order to fill its binary cast lists. In the acting training context, phrases like: "Work on your masculinity," "You still need a character in a dress," or "No, this role is not for you." are frequently heard. Non-binary students and alumni have to fit into these binary structures over and over again in the theatrical work context in order to get jobs at all. So they have to pretend, they have to hide who they are.

In doing so, theater perpetuates the very violence that many queer people are already so constantly at the mercy of, and becomes the arm of a queer-hostile society. It is not a safe space.

## New foundations

So, in order to make training institutions more accessible to queer actors, we need a fundamentally different understanding of what acting is. The concept of the autonomous actor must replace the concept of the *neutral* actor. Actors must not be treated as if they were the puppets of a director. They don't have to be multifaceted. They don't have to be good at singing. They don't have to be able to do handstands. They don't have to be masculine or feminine. They don't have to be or do anything they haven't decided to be or do themselves. Actors are artists. Autonomy and experiences of self-efficacy are becoming the most important acting crafts of the present.

In 2023, it must be a natural part of the training to learn not only acting basics, but also the ability to create working basics that help everyone to feel free in artistic processes, to perceive each other, to take each other seriously, to give each other support, to care for each other. Well-established exercises, practices and traditions must be reflected in the mirror of the present, deconstructed and updated together with the students. Space must be made for new exercises and traditions. The same goes for pauses, doubts and for the ideas of all participants (including assistants).

Existing hierarchies must be made transparent, honestly named as such, reflected upon, criticized and dismantled in the right places. As a Millennial myself, who is close to the reality of many students' lives, I know that it is illusory to work with students in educational contexts

without hierarchies – because a power dynamic exists, whether you like it or not. We are not equals. The question should be: What do we make out of that?

Also on an institutional level, training institutions have to face small and large challenges. Here are just a few of many:

- establishment and development of a team of equal opportunity officers
- a transparent system of clarification of experiences of discrimination
- organizing workshops and seminars on gender-inclusive language
- degendered restrooms and locker rooms
- creation of safer spaces for members of marginalized groups
- gradual breaking away from a patriarchal play canon
- raising awareness about the need for representation of non-normative bodies and queer identities in all areas of the university
- indication of the pronouns that go with the name
- abolishing the construction of "male and female roles"
- active involvement of universities in local politics to protect students, staff and guests from violence in public spaces
- encouraging actors to also write their own texts and plays in order to expand the canon
- promotion of student interest groups

- designing selection and audition processes in a people-friendly way
- ...

### **Anecdote: Romeo and Juliet**

As a professor of acting and equal opportunity officer focusing on queer issues at the Academy of Performing Arts Baden-Württemberg, I have noticed at many points in recent years how important the representation of queer people in the faculty is for the individual artistic development of queer students. Two years ago, for example, I worked with two gay male-socialized first-year students on scenes from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and acted out the balcony scene – i.e. a scene in which the star-crossed lovers hide from their parents and swear their love for each other. The two students got very physical with each other in the process. They rolled over each other, danced with each other, made out passionately and felt free with each other. They did not meet on a balcony as in the original, but in Juliet's room, closed the curtains in front of the windows and thus hid from her parents. Again and again there were moments when Romeo ran to the window, tore it open and wanted to scream out. Again and again, Juliet quickly ran and called him back. At some point in the scene, they propose to each other, breaking all the rules they can possibly break, in the logic of the play, making themselves outcasts, living a utopia. At this moment in the scene, in our realization, Juliet went to the window, opened it and confessed to Romeo. In reaction,

both of them turned into wild animals, raging through the room with tremendous energy, screaming from the windows. They broke free from the shackles of their repressive heteronormative environment. The casting of two male socialized actors who are gay themselves changes and reinforces the narrative of the young lovers and so the scene becomes like an outing narrative: the windows are torn open – they can't hold it back any longer.

An important moment occurred in the work that is still present for me today: After the two students became physical with each other on stage, we realized in the reflection conversation that all three of us, as gay people, are or have been in relationships, where we publicly do not hold our partner's hand for various reasons. This raised the question of whether it was even right to show this intense, physical gay encounter in front of a cisheteronormative audience in such a public place as a stage. And all three of us asked ourselves: do we even want this? We could also decide that the audience shouldn't see the scene, that only a certain audience should see the scene, that we don't owe the audience (and in this case, the university audience) anything. And just opening up that possibility, that you could choose not to do things, not to show things, gave all three of us a sense of freedom, of autonomy, of control – and gave the actors an immense sense of urgency. The scene became political. Just as our sexuality was political. The actors were autonomous.

This moment only became possible because all three people present had a shared and personal experience that connected us. If I did not have this experience, I would

not have asked this question. For me, this example shows the rich potential of an educational landscape in which students who experience various forms of marginalization find real contact persons in the teaching staff. I would even say that a contemporary teaching staff for an autonomous student body can only develop if it consists of people with as diverse biographies and experiences as possible and always leaves vacancies for people with, in themselves, different biographies and experiences.

### **Institution**

If a drama training institution faces up to these challenges, it can become a sustainable place that interrupts social dynamics of violence. It becomes an attractive location for new groups of applicants and offers students a framework in which they feel more secure to actively question repressive and internalized social constructs and support each other in their artistic and individual personal development.

In addition to teaching, I am also a queer equality officer at the Academy for Performing Arts Baden-Württemberg (ADK) and have been observing for several years now how the climate within the institution is changing due to the presence of such discourses. The academy is considered a queer safer space among German-speaking drama schools (which should be understood in comparison to other schools, because as I mentioned earlier: a safe space is a utopia). The Academy has formulated a Code of Conduct that states that an experience of abusive behavior

and/or discrimination becomes the subject of a protected institutional clarification process the moment a person perceives it as discrimination or abusive behavior and has a feeling of insecurity. The clarification process is then primarily not about verifying whether the allegations are true, but about doing everything possible to make everyone feel equally safe at work again.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the Code of Conduct became the central tool of the work as an Equal Opportunity Officer, because everyone who works on the ADK has to sign it.

Over the years, the ADK has not only become safer and more attractive for queer students and applicants, but it has also broadened the acting and artistic self-understanding of all associates. Many graduates of the ADK look for alternative artistic nuclei or found some themselves, in which they can tell their own stories, write their own texts and find the courage to expand their own discipline of acting and to merge it with other fields of action. They are politically engaged, show solidarity and break through toxic competitive ideologies.

### **Flexibility**

A key competency needed to make this institutional change happen is flexibility. I fondly remember the time in the lockdowns when no one really knew what was going to happen. Classes could no longer be held in physical co-presence; everyone had to stay home. During this

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to incidents that are perceived as abusive behavior and/or discrimination and legally do not count as criminal offenses.

time, there was no longer a blueprint for how to work together, or for theater arts to work in these online spaces, so we had to get creative together. A kind of equal playing field formed, which created a paradigm shift in teaching. It was no longer possible to teach didactically, because the experiences of the lecturers were only moderately transferable and applicable to this completely new situation. Other competencies became important, other questions had to be asked. "What do I teach?" became "How can I support the students in their processes?", black box evenings became intermedial art projects, monodisciplinary theater makers became transdisciplinary shapers of the present.

The theater makers have learned: We can adapt. We can find solutions. And that is an empowering narrative in the reality of gigantic societal transformation processes.

### **Workshop with the students of CHANGE NOW!**

In early November 2022, I conducted a two-day workshop on the role of queerness in acting practices with some students from the *CHANGE NOW!* project and with acting students from the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris. I prepared to do various basic acting exercises with the students, to reflect on these exercises together, and to seek experiences of self-efficacy in them. These experiences were to form the basis for conversations about acting autonomy, self-awareness, individuality, independence, responsibility. I also sent the students a scene beforehand that I wanted to work on with them. This scene is about a pair of lovers who don't fit into

the system, experience a lot of shit, and then actively fight back against the system using different strategies. I wanted to explore with the students the most diverse relationship dynamics and energies that arise in changing play constellations – in order to jointly measure the revolutionary potential that lies in non-normative relationship models and in Queer Joy.

My first concept did not work out. On the one hand, I did have the impression that the Conservatoire students (who were also all at a much earlier stage of their education) were able to draw a lot from the exercises. On the other hand, it was also noticeable that the exercises had almost the opposite effect on the students of *CHANGE NOW!* from what I intended them to have. They did not support the students in achieving artistic autonomy, but rather restricted them in their artistic freedom – the students were already autonomous in their artistic creation. Together we talked about this and deconstructed the exercises.

For the second day, I therefore completely overturned my plan and adapted it much more to the needs of the *CHANGE NOW!* students. I took on three things: 1. I wanted to do an exercise that would invite an intense conversation about the role and purpose of acting in contemporary stage narratives and performances. 2. Instead of working on the theatrical development of the described speaking theater scene, I planned to prepare a score for a performative realization of different motifs of this scene. 3. At the end of the workshop an atmosphere was to be created, in which the students first gave themselves and then each other forms of care.

This plan worked out better. Even the first exercise, inviting conversation about the role of acting in a theatrical present in which representation and biography play a central role, generated such a long discussion that we didn't get to the second exercise and jumped right into the third. I was transparent about my thoughts and uncertainties throughout the workshop.

It is difficult for me to write more specifically about the workshop and my experience with the students because I think they should write about it themselves. Part of the concept of the autonomous actor is to retain interpretive authority over narratives about oneself. Students collectively generated knowledge and gained insights during the workshop that hopefully will help them on their artistic journey and that they may share in other artistic practices or educational contexts. This knowledge and insight are theirs. Not for me to sell.

Perhaps a short message to the students who participated in the workshop: I realize that I was not sufficiently prepared for the high level of discussion we had about theater and autonomy that I was able to make the connection well to all that can be called queer in it. I understand the ability to deconstruct a repressive theatrical norm or an acting tradition as queer, because the bourgeois theater with its binary concepts of gender and sex is a bulwark of a heteronormative majority society. My experience in Ludwigsburg is that if you manage to create a space where everyone feels empowered, in that space the potency, necessity and fragility of empowerment as a cultural practice is also understood. This forms a foundation

for theatrical transformation. Feel free to write to me on Insta or something what you think about this. <3

## Potential

The students do not continue the traditions in which we as professors were artistically socialized. They have understood that the concept of the *neutral actor* is a monopoly on violence and are naturally creating new models for it. Educational institutions can accompany them in this process. But to do so, they must also be prepared to face important institutional challenges. They need to stop making themselves the arm of an LGBTQIA+ hostile society. They need to encourage individual artistic development instead of perpetuating the cult of excellence. They need to encourage students to find their own paths. They must be flexible and adapt fluidly to changing needs. They must encourage *transdisciplinary* and *intermedial* work. They must arrive in the present, because that is where their students live.

Exchange programs like *CHANGE NOW!* form a central basis for this. In doing so, *CHANGE NOW!* also breaks with a toxic meeting tradition of acting schools. In my past experience with cross-university exchange formats, it was far too often about competitions and comparisons. The competitiveness of the universities was thereby transferred to the students. With *CHANGE NOW!*, I had the impression that it was more about a kind of community building and an exchange of experiences. And that's where the potential lies, because we can't meet today's challenges alone, but only with each other.

Part — III

Access, equity,  
anti-racism and  
decoloniality

shy\* play

Doing Neurodiversity

*aster arribas*

*and*

*antje nestel*

Writing-with accommodates an interaction that does not necessarily involve two people writing side by side, although this is partly what happened here. A meeting of words, ideas, doubts, and frustrations is affected through a coming-together in a virtual domain. Entering and leaving, pop-up suggestions, chat messages, emojis, and banter surround this interaction at all times: a simultaneity in which a text is always informed by the other and the affective field that looms over it. A directionality of reading is suggested, but never without potential shifts in attention → ↓ ↔ ∪ ← → ↶ ↷ ↸ ↹

## Towards Neurodiverse Relational Futurities

The following text is partly an introduction to a platform co-initiated by aster arribas and antje nestel at the academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam that operates at the intersection between art-as-process, (un)learning and neurodiversity. This platform, for now, carries the name shy\* play. Shy is used as a shorthand for shyness, introversion and neurodivergence. The asterisk gestures a refusal to stick to a final form of fixed categories. Shyness, introversion, and neurodivergence, in our view, are not fixed identities but rather, relational tendencies that are mobile, in-forming and transformative.

Before we discerned our desires for experimenting with what neurodivergent socialities can do *together-in-difference*, we felt unaccommodated and estranged from most social structures in which we participated. We repeatedly felt unattuned to the ways (social) spaces proposed forms of movement and interaction: ways that seemed to be aimed at a certain image of the monohuman and its supposedly ideal forms of knowing, communicating, creating, learning and behaving. "Why do most people seem at ease with these exclusionary ways?" We questioned ourselves and each other repeatedly. These ways felt imposed upon us, like a regime that classifies values and experiences of existence and difference into a few selected and interconnected ones, while aggressively pushing aside the rest as being somehow pathological and less-than-human. After long periods of wavering in the grip of this regime of values, which we have assigned

## Encountering shy\* play Techniques

shy\* play is a baby, not only because it's a newborn platform, but because shy\* play aims to operate in a baby-like state, affectively searching, absorbing and learning, rather than defining, categorising, or creating tools that can measure inclusion. This baby proposes a shift in the creation of value systems, both discursively and practically, which requires care, commitment, attention and nurturing. This baby's intention is avoiding stagnation, in other words, inviting difference to thrive over and over again. In this, it demands feeding its creative processes in a constant manner by reconsidering our practices endlessly.

The baby platform was born in the summer of 2022 between mouthfuls of rice and noodles – you know, when things suddenly click, take a certain shape and a provisional name after a long period of gestation. Since November of the same year – and thanks to the support of Centre of Expertise for Creative Innovation in the Netherlands – we have been collaborating with the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Fashion Institute, conducting research sessions with a group of students from both academies. Through these collaborations, we have developed relational techniques that will be described later in the text through passages from the workshop that was shaped by our experimentations. In order to open up shy\* play research and invite students to do it with us, it was essential to create a welcoming and accommodating space. Intentionally avoiding describing what accommodating means for neurodivergents, we began by af-

many names and definitions, our desires finally landed and propelled us into action. The landing of these desires concurrently made us realise that this regime demands exclusively neurotypical mono-ways-of-being-together, aside from the many other forms of subjugation it also encompasses. These include whiteness, ableism, speciesism, heteronormativity, and gender norms, which all reciprocally inform neurotypicality.

As neurodivergent bodyminds, we reject any expectations imposed by the prevailing social structure, such as those presupposed in educational systems, which tell us to overcome or change our individual ways of being in the world by adopting normalised forms of neurotypical behaviour. Being “more” outspoken, participative, visible by way of eye contact, responding to questions in a certain timing, making sense according to the ordinary or common sense, speaking (out loud), maintaining certain control of movement, etc. is not a future that shy\* play envisions for neurodivergent bodyminds and the world as a whole. Our supposed “problems” are neurotypical inventions, social constructions, and a reflection of neurotypicality’s toxic core.

The medical model, which is the dominant discourse in the West, adheres to a humanist rubric which characterises certain neurocognitive functioning as defective, relative to a presupposed norm. While we do not support a pathologising model, we do acknowledge that diagnoses can enable and facilitate access to support in relation to needs for many people, even if these needs are often only a problem due to societies that create infra-

firming that we don’t only value face-to-face encounters or frontal ways of interacting. We value our relationships with the minor and the more-than-human in space. We don’t only value linear ways of understanding. We value making sense that goes beyond the self-evident, common sense, and the ordinary. Furthermore, we asserted that the space to emerge from these encounters would adopt a rhetoric that goes beyond voicing as the only language: it also voices stims, tics, misunderstood gestures, lurches, and stutters.

Departing from the previous affirming gestures, we invited the students — Angie, Aurelie, Agne, Helene, Yujing, Neslihan, and Kiki — to experiment with us in different ways. To start, we created a *neurodivergent mapping room* to identify and shape recognised and felt neurotypical and extraverted oppressions, as well as neurodivergent needs and desires, within our immediate educational system. This *mapping room* was designed to foster quiet conversations through different communication stations, which allowed us to read, write, draw, doodle, and respond to the ideas of others in an expansive and non-linear manner. We asked, among many other questions, “What is your mode of reflection?” “Where does reflection start?” and “What is an inviting space for you?”

structures and discourses based solely on the “normal”. In contrast, the Neurodiversity Paradigm — a term coined by fellow neurodivergent writer, Nick Walker (2021) — rejects pathologisation and the idea that there is such a thing as a "normal" bodymind. Neuronormativity is an ideal that forcefully reverberates in our societies, persuading bodyminds to make the assumption that there is such a thing as a "normal mind" or a "normal brain". In truth, this is fallacious; no bodymind can ever be normal. By “neurotypical”, we mean a bodymind's performance that convincingly finds it possible, bearable and desirable to maintain a performance that complies with the dominant standards of neuronormativity. For us, as well as many others, the neuronormative command is unbearable and often results in, among other things, periods of depression, social anxiety and exhaustion.

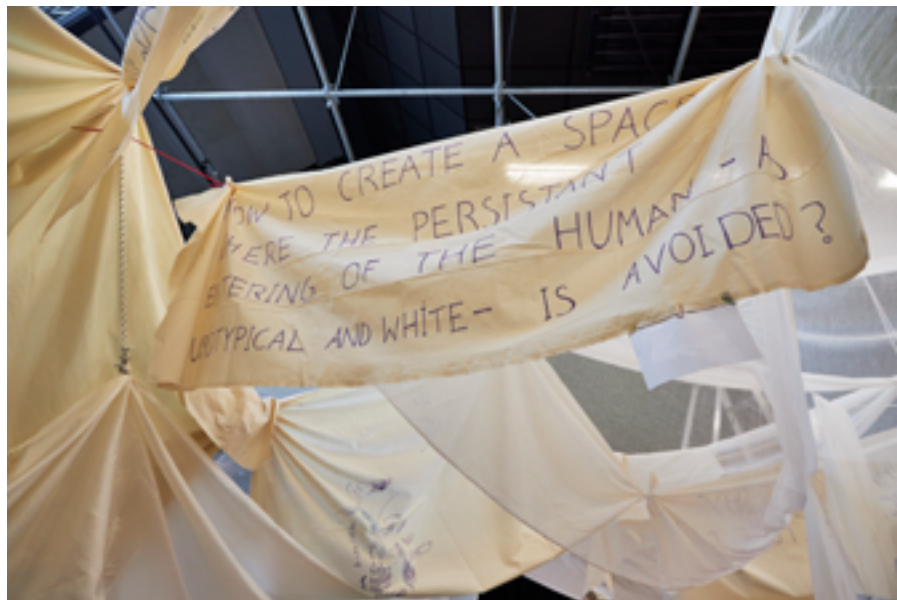


Photo: Jonathan Andrew

||| slow – ness || for || Re-visiting |||

space :::::::::::::: is :::::::::::::: speaking?

for you?

(over) stimulation levels

– I have no idea what inviting means to me, it's a feeling I think.

a few snippets of the map

As we let this complex map in-form, touch and change us, two hundred meters of white, beige and gray-colored fabric entered the research and the physical space. We proposed that the students, in collaboration with the fabric, develop relational techniques informed by our neurodivergent tendencies, needs and desires, some of which we had previously mapped, and others that emerged along the way while we were together.

A room is filled with two hundred metres of fabric; it's a lake of fabric, some of us feel like swimming dry in it. This is a strong conscious bodymind response, affirming a curiosity and, furthermore, the possibility of a multitude of options. This room is screaming – play around! Of course, it is a dance studio, which already presupposes some kind of movement or a potential invitation to move and dance, among many other presuppositions.

Some of you may be wondering why we bring neurodivergence, shyness, and introversion side-by-side. Especially considering that shyness and introversion have not been pathologised in the same way that the medical model has envisaged neurodivergent dis-orders. Although shy and introverted experiences share tendencies with historically pathologised cognitive functioning such as autism, dyslexia, and ADHD, the medical model usually does not recognise them as pathologies themselves. Shy and introverted experiences are usually considered second-hand personality traits one must overcome or repress, implying that this very thing that makes one shy and/or introverted is harmful and must be defeated with the intention of excavating one from the shy and introverted prison. For those who maintain that this is true, let us be clear once and for all: shy and introverted expressions are not a prison one should be liberated from for the sake of “freedom”; these expressions are co-constitutive of who one is, emerging as one’s very identity, even if one is always an expression of a relational field and for only a brief moment in time.

Our motive, in bringing these tendencies side-by-side, is to regard shyness and introversion as neurodivergent. This gesture affords us two additional manoeuvres. First, it permits us to examine the interplay between the exclusionary demands of both neurotypicality and extraversion, usually through extraversion intensifying certain neurotypical presuppositions — the extraverting of neurotypicality. Their relationship is analogous to that of a teacher and their highest-performing student in an educational system entirely focused on methods of transmis-

In any case, this bodily sensation, the swimming desire, hints at some of the questions we have come across before: How does a space speak? What directions are suggested when we enter a room? What do and don’t these directions allow?

At this point, we can affirm that a space is never neutral and has far more of an effect on our bodyminds than is typically acknowledged. Generally, a space will have a huge influence on how we experience ourselves, how we actualise, how we interact, how we learn, how we perceive, how we think, etc. We could agree on that, right? Then, why don’t our learning spaces ask who and what these spaces are created for? Even better, why don’t they explore the potential of space by proposing different spatial arrangements? Why do we think sitting in a circle, facing the teacher’s face at the head of the space, dancing in an open empty space, etc. is a good idea?

When I walk into a room and there is a circle of chairs ready for everyone to sit, my first reaction is „Get the hell out of here!” This reaction, without dismissing the suffering it has inflicted on some of our bodyminds, also makes us wonder: What does this circle presuppose that is so terrifying? One aspect, for example, is the vocalized self-presentation rounds that are frequently expected and taken for granted as a good meeting starter. Based on experience, we can say that this type of introduction often assumes that everyone can talk, in general, or when it’s our turn; that everybody can bear with the conditions of the environment to feel okay; that we all can be looked at and handle frontal and direct interaction; that everyone

sion. Neurotypicality connotes a notion of normality that encompasses ideas that define the humanist subject as the properly moving-thinking-talking human. The teacher (under neurotypicality) mandates the only means of talking: linearly, face-to-face, intentionally, and voluntarily; extraversion (the good student) registers and amplifies the command of its instructor. Speak neurotypically: confidently, loudly, fast, in abundance, and preferably in front of large crowds. Similar transmissions between this teacher and student relationship take place in humans' two other attributes as well. Teacher: thinking occurs in a centralised subject, non-relationally, still, in a predetermined setting and location, and must conform to common sense and a certain timing. The student intensifies: think quickly, react swiftly, give primary attention to humans, centre the thinking subject exclusively and to an excessive degree. Teacher: move intentionally, with purpose, voluntarily and in a goal-oriented manner. Pupil: move intentionally towards a social end, voluntarily, for the purpose of gaining attention.

Secondly, in considering shyness and introversion as neurodivergent, we aim to transition away from a discourse on neurodivergence rooted in pathology and towards a discourse on neurodivergence as "neuroqueering". This much-anticipated term — actualised independently and simultaneously by Nick Walker, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon and Remi Yergeau — designates a process of becoming: as Nick Walker would say, "you're neuroqueer if you neuroqueer" (Walker 2021, 161). Neuroqueering, as a verb, not only enables us to go beyond

can tell an „about me” story that makes sense; that we have a sense of self that fits the circle; and that we are ready to share. However, each of us embodies different presence and participation modalities, and some of us cannot or don't want to cope with some of these aspects. For very different and, let us stress it, very legitimate reasons, some of us cannot share, are not ready or would rather not be ready to participate in such a neurotypical structure.

Spaces and directions suggested in them, the dynamics of their furniture and their environment conditions, when left unquestioned, often perpetuate all of the above assumptions and many more. These unquestioned spaces embody, support and enact the optimal functioning of hierarchical relationships, such as educational methods of transmission (those of the teachings of neurotypicality and the performance of its best student); they also house the traces of nontransversal practices, or practices that are not crafted from the collective emergence of their events, but from predetermined and static values. Not only do we think these spaces are oppressive to neurodivergent bodyminds, contrary to common sense, we never start the event with our entrance into the space; so many thoughts, memories, affects, anticipations and preparations have come before our neurodivergent entrances. Passing the space's threshold comes pretty late in the story of the event's unfolding. While for so many, the threshold is not even perceived, we always enter differently; some of us carrying an overwhelming load or the heaviness of a fear that precedes and overrules our social encounters.

identity politics, but also allows us to view neurodivergence as a form of neuroqueering — a process of actively constructing worlds outside the realm of neurotypicality. Following this, a tremendous consequence opens itself up to us: anyone can potentially neuroqueer, and, as Walker (2021) says, there are infinite possible ways to neuroqueer. (We would like to express in writing our immense sigh of relief we emitted upon putting this sentence down!)

We believe in the power of neurodivergence for neuroqueering and creating radically different values: values that do not enforce neurotypical ways and do not problematise and/or pathologise individuals, but create new ways of relating-in-difference. Thus, shy\* play operates and desires different forms of encounters emanating from the question: what can neurodivergent sociality do

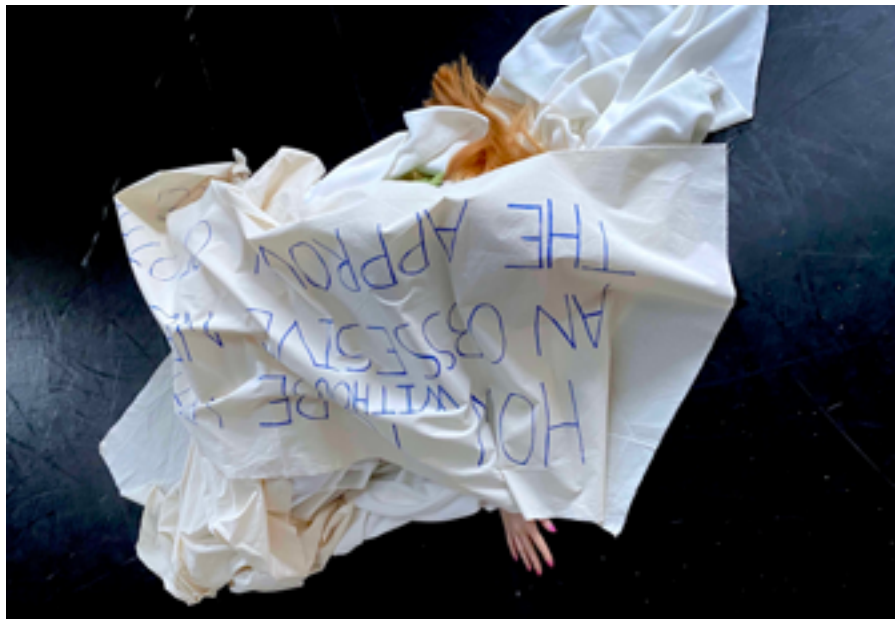


Photo: shy\* play

Neuronormativity dictates the naturalization of the cultural codes that dominate our encounters. Seemingly harmless gestures and seemingly gentle mannerisms, which commonly seem neutral due to their naturalization, can have a huge impact on some neurodivergent bodyminds. For example, for the „small talk haters,” or rather, those who don’t or can’t engage in small talk, the supposedly polite „How are you?” questions and other such normative codes of conduct that orchestrate social encounters can be truly unsettling or even feel like an outright tragedy.

We take this hater’s hate to heart and start ruminating on the beginning of the workshop. We ask ourselves and each other: How can we meet? Do we need or do we desire to get to know each other before we share a space? If knowing is desired, what kind of knowledge could that be? Does it need to be based on uttering identity markers or identity narratives? Can we build trust if we don’t listen to the other speaking?

Acting upon those questions became, among others, the practice of the wall of fabulation: using sticky notes, we (participants) wrote and drew stories to make up the selves we desired to introduce to the group, including a description that would connect the notes with a body in space. Having an appointed time to visit each other’s notes was important in the beginning, and so was keeping these actions timeless by inviting desired additions, changes and readings to be made at any time during the workshop. This way of prolonged, silent introductions opened up new possibilities for us; it let the getting-to-

beyond neurotypicality and its best student, and all the other forms of oppression that in-form them?

Neuroqueering's additional intention (as can be identified in the word) is to demonstrate that the queering of neuronormativity and the queering of heteronormativity are imbricated at some constitutional level. Walker and Yergeau provide the example of the movement of hands. Autistic people tend to engage in stimming with their hands, which neurotypicality characterises as anti-social, non-relational, and non-discursive; in other words, neurotypicality questions how these movements can have any meaning if they lack volitional intentionality. As a result, neurotypicality deems these movements counter-productive and harmful to one's social existence and society as a whole and must be controlled in accordance to a normative performance of binary gender roles: act like a normal girl or like a normal boy (Walker 2021; Yergeau 2018). Nonetheless, this interconnectedness does not necessarily mean that those who are neurodivergent or hold multiple, often marginalised, relational tendencies or oppressed characteristics are not excluded, even within groups attempting to be inclusive and reject dominant embodied discourses of (hetero)normativity. Speaking from experience, we regularly feel the exclusion perpetuated in minority identity communities (specifically LGBTQ+, as we often frequent these places) with their repeated demands to speak and perform loudly, and preferably, from the/a centre. This is why it is essential for shy\* play to construct our own socialities, departing from neurodivergent desires and needs.

know-each-other sneak out of the spotlight and invited an expansive and transforming sense of self to cruise between the sticky notes.

Continuing, a two hundred-meter-long snake of knotted fabric awaits and in-forms the space. As a technique, we suggest getting to know all the different fabrics by pulling, collecting, moving, passing, reading and touching them. When one pulls the snake, others may feel the pull due to our physical connection with the fabric. When I get pulled, I enter a space of relation that might highlight my connection with another person—we negotiate our desires to move and to be moved. At the same time, multiple other elements, like textures, light, and sound are also brought to the forefront in a „dance of attention”; an ecology is forming. The subtlety of these movements allows some of us to parse sensory information at a very soothing pace, and I believe I can feel my body cells fully listening, lingering there. Participation is now far beyond the personal „who” and „what”. This also means that our different attentions and bodyminds have room to move within this dance, and there is plenty of room for accommodation. The fabric snake activates a centreless relational motion that makes us wonder: What if there is no centre of attention or space? What if a centre is never perceived? This technique simultaneously actualizes ways of moving that dance beyond a neurotypical and extraverted centre. These actualizations become multiple potential solutions, never exhausting the endless other possibilities that can be realised departing from these questions.

## Shy\* Play as Always Relational

As briefly mentioned above, neurotypicality is part of a larger humanist project that takes for granted the human through what Sylvia Wynter would call the “descriptive statement” (Wynter 2003) of the human. This category of the human, as Wynter emphasises, is obsessed with perpetuating the “genre” of the human as white, neurotypical, heteronormative, male, able-bodied, etc.. Those who stand outside the bounds of this genre of the human are subject to dire repercussions. One of the consequences for neurodivergent bodyminds is the manner they are excluded from education, not because they are incapable of participating or coming to knowledge, but solely because their ways of participating are not valued by the genre and its policing technologies. Consequently, shy\* play has become fixated with creating forms of participating that give up entirely on this genre and its technologies or, in the words of Audrey Lorde, its “tools” (Lorde 2018).

Thus, shy\* play asks: What if, instead of viewing neurodivergent performances, expressions and desires as something to oppress and/or overcome, we began the discussion from the perspective of what else a bodymind can do? By calling human's current category a "genre", does Wynter not show that the human is a "praxis" that can take on other expressions? What if the genre's assumption that we as subjects are the ultimate directors of our movements, perceptions, thoughts, desires, etc. is false? Neurotypicality teaches us that a bodymind begins and ends in a skin container we can easily perceive. These teachings, which also

At some point, we begin to create shapes that become bodies that appear to belong to worlds we don't



Photo: shy\* play

foreground the normatively rational over the emergently creative or intuitive, the individual over the relational, regulate our existence towards a very restricted notion of what a bodymind can do. Neurotypicality has erected a metaphorical barricade around neurodivergent bodyminds, obstructing the passage and flow of new expressions and limiting the possible connections with the world.

It is time that we find out for ourselves what neurodiversity can do. However, this should only be done if it means, as Estée Klar and Adam Wolfond remark, a "neurodiversity as relation" (Klar and Wolfond 2023). This idea that relations in-form us and not the other way around, is prominent amongst process philosophers and forms the basis for shy\* play. We must resist, as Erin Manning writes, "returning to a model of inside-outside, where the human subject is situated as the motivator of experience" (Manning 2016, 15), especially since we often hear from some neurodivergent bodyminds that this separation between body and world is not how they experience life's unfolding. The human subject is always born anew out of a complex relational ecology where the subject and object have not yet been determined. In the process of determination, there is always space for difference, variation, and the initiation of something that has not been felt, thought, or seen before. It is in line with this idea of the human as relational that shy\* play asks: how can we, in relation, practice sociality beyond neurotypical ways of doing, interacting, creating, learning and moving? Our aim is not only to accommodate neurodivergent tendencies, qualities of expression, and relational participation, but also to

know much about yet. We cannot say for sure what is underneath these shapes. A cloth houses a leg that is connected to a hand, which is connected to a shadow. Next to it, several arms try to tie and untie something like a tail attached to a stack of fabric. What a joy beyond comprehension! It is the joy that reassures us that we don't need to understand each other's logics for us to exist in relation. It also makes us wonder what kinds of visibility this opacity can create. So we ask, how do we desire to be „visible“?

I mostly want to appear bigger than I usually think I am; the bigger the mass the better, I often think to myself. I'm padding my head with thick fabric, an unpredictable growth which eventually also covers most of my face. I'm not sure if I'm getting lost or found, but within that wave-like movement the feeling of the self—that "I" that wants to appear bigger — loses the edges that constrain the body that carries it. This body loses its scale and its measuring desires. As we wrap, we wonder: How do these shapes and their movements produce (new) bodies? And how are these bodies' presences affecting one another?

There is a thirty-minute break (but of what?)

Some of us fear breaks; breaks from breaks are often a necessary consequence.

clearly abandon this imposed dialectical relationship with neurotypicality. We do not need the genre of the human to find out what our bodyminds are capable of.

Shy\* play proposes spacetime that allows for different values to be created beyond neurotypicality. In process philosophy, nothing holds inherent value; value must always be established in the event as this and that expression. Therefore, we ask: How can we shift the conditions away from neurotypicality, so that different values can express themselves? This is not achieved by pre-determining or defining these values in advance before the event's unfolding. Rather, to shift the conditions of experience, our workshops offer techniques of embodied relation that are in-formed by neurodivergent tendencies and characteristics, in pursuit of discovering anew each time how neurodivergent socialities value. Learning, as a way of accommodating difference, is how we describe this sociality-forming practice. Accommodating difference not only recognises the differences among different bodies, their characteristics and needs, but also the potential for difference that is not owned by anyone in particular: that stuff which always goes 'beneath' and 'parallels' our relationships and that which is co-responsible for processes of differentiation. Sociality is never just about the aggregation of bodies. It is, as Manning writes, "the quality that shifts the conditions of a relational field" (Manning 2020, 70).

The required constraints for creating neurodivergent pedagogical environments that follow the ethics of learning as a way of accommodating difference should, according to shy\* play, be procedural; a collective con-



Photo: shy\* play

Now, we are all invited to create and shift spaces following our own desires. We also hear the questions that have propelled this technique into existence, for example: What would a neurodivergent architecture enable? How would a space invite us to back away from frontal modes of attention? How can we create an architecture that challenges the view that the human subject is at the center of experience?

We attach fabrics to ropes that hang from the ceiling in order to lift them up, and with no plan whatsoever of how the space should look, we start an improvisation of creating thresholds, passages, smaller spaces, hiding compartments, curtains that interrupt encounters, tunnels, etc. By pulling, I lift a fabric and attach it to an-

struction of the spacetime with those visiting (both human and more-than-human) should assume that each mode of existing, seeing, voicing, experiencing, participating, expressing, and moving in the environment has the same existential value, all the while recognising the effects of cumulative trauma load that the neurotypical demands can have on a neurodivergent bodymind.

other fabric that someone else has hung from the ceiling. Our fabrics entangle and shift unexpectedly in this collective construction, where spaces become a web. We keep lifting, knotting, pulling, changing, crawling, navigating and knotting again, until we sense the space is resting and welcoming our shared and different desires. A welcoming and accommodating space confirms to us that a subversion of neurotypical spatial directionality has happened, and our bodyminds happily agree (but until when? We'll have to wait until we exit the room to know).

So there we are, both tired and relaxed and like I just got a „brain” massage. Sometimes lying down and enjoying the reverberations left by the touch of the fabrics after almost three hours of touch, sometimes walking, thresholding, finding new corners, new details, new textures, new windows, new people, a shy\* „hello” , smooth surfaces, some notes, some drawings, some colors, some noises, some giggles, new ways of participating and new ways of being together. We are also being invited to add to these spaces messages, drawings, gestures, stories, clippings, cutouts or anything else one might wish. Someone finds a note that talks about cats and responds by adding a heart. I walk around and find a text next to a drawing that says „I want to get closer to you but I'm scared, so I drop the idea, but we have all the time, I hope you are reading this.”

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# Letters from Lying Down:

# On Access Intimacy

*Carly Everaert  
and  
Mira Thompson*

**Dear Carly,**

Yesterday night, when I couldn't sleep I started thinking about how our ongoing collaboration has changed me. Because it has changed me, profoundly. This collaboration means I don't only talk about the embodiment we so often try to explain in our lessons, but actually live it ourselves, while working. Maybe this is exactly what disabled thinker and writer Mia Mingus means when she talks about Access Intimacy.

She describes it as:

That elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met. It is not dependent on someone having a political understanding of disability, ableism or access. Some of the people I have experienced the deepest access intimacy with (especially able bodied people) have had no education or exposure to a political understanding of disability. (Mingus, 2011)

I never thought it was possible to experience what you preach in such a literal way in a professional setting. It never happened to me. I always say to the students "our body always means something, always

brings something and even always lacks something. Our body produces a different meaning in every context.” But somehow this was applied in our collaboration without me realizing it.

Our Zoom working sessions take place with me lying down on the couch, while taking notes on my phone with my right hand and talking to you via my laptop, which I hold steady with my left hand. This was always something I tried to hide for everyone on the other side of the screen. What would my colleagues gain from my pain? Would they think I’m not working hard enough? Would they not ask me back for advice or questions when they see I live horizontally for a good amount of the day? This is all my problem to deal with, is what I thought.

How ironic it is that all of my work around disability justice is about dismantling these ideas. The work we do, I do, always places individual experience into a societal context. I know that this is not my problem to deal with. I know we all, as a society have to take into account the needs people who live by a different tempo, a different way, a different brain. Disability allows us to makes room for another artistic aesthetic, another way of working and being together and another way of producing art. This is where change happens.

Yet me lying down did not add up with this knowledge.

I have to admit that the way I thought of my horizontal working habit was also heavily influenced by the students. How can I ask them to be so vulnerably honest with us when we ask them about their own expe-

rience with Access Intimacy, while I am not peeling off these layers of shame myself? When one student shared her time in the hospital, crying and holding hands with her friend who was admitted to that same hospital, with that same serious illness, I felt like I was betraying her.

The student, who was visibly distressed folded her hands over her face, a visual representation of shame, and looked at me after slowly lowering her hands.

I didn’t know it then, but I want to thank her.

**Dear Mira,**

What a beautiful thing, these insights that come while lying awake. A bed sounds like a very appropriate place to articulate thoughts around intimacy. But also the way our body tells us things too: while lying down you get to understand what lying down means for you. Your body, as you share with us, practices lying down a lot. As a teacher, I feel very strongly what we can learn not only through exchanging ideas, but to share our embodied experiences. I developed this 'Radical Thinking' course at the Academy of Theatre and Dance especially around this idea; to learn to contextualize these embodied experiences in a larger societal context. To use one’s embodied experience by researching theorists and artists who analyze the world through an intersectional lens.

When I asked you to become a teacher in this course that was developed for the second year students at the Scenography department at the Academy, I also could not fathom how crucial your exchanges with the students

were going to be. That you brought this profound term “Access Intimacy” into the room. I do not want to call it a definition, because it is so wonderfully elusive, not a categorization, but a way of thinking through and staying with the trouble.. It makes things come to the surface, by taking time, by being attentive., by taking care. You also try to explain in your lesson why you like the English word ‘care’ so much more than the Dutch word ‘zorg’. As ‘zorg’ expresses more worry.

The first time you taught your Access Intimacy class this group of second year students had been studying mostly on their own due to Covid. Being isolated, not to be able to grow as a group, they seemed socially very awkward. But showing your music video Tiny Shoes (Hjermind, 2018) and having them read and think of an access intimacy moment of their own, seemed to open them up to you and me and each other. It seemed to open up the kind of interdependency we are trying to articulate as an important practice. Could it be that a horizontal practice could help us understand how to produce knowledges and exchanges that are non-hierarchical? As you said, these exchanges are mutually beneficial: sharing these intimate moments made you embrace your horizontal practice, as just as professional as sitting up straight is supposed to be.

Do you remember that we put in a proposal to show the video lesson we made out of your Access Intimacy class in a symposium? That we wanted to share it while all the participants were lying down too? The idea came because I did sense you becoming uncomfortable;

that you had to lay down, while we were working. So we decided we were both going to lie down during the remainder of our zoom session. We could not articulate yet what kind of knowledge we were producing; that we were trying a funny kind of access intimacy, creating things horizontally. Could that become the perfect metaphor for interdependency?<sup>1</sup>

**Dear Carly,**

It turns out to be a tough practice to respond to your lovely letter. I do have lots to say, yes, but your letter almost seems like an ending, a conclusion to what we are creating together. I must have read it six times before having an idea about how to acknowledge your thoughts, while also bringing in more of our fruitful and thought-provoking conversations into this correspondence.

Let me start by saying how much I admire the existence of your ‘Radical Thinking’ course. Never underestimate the immense value of a teacher like you who dreams instead of knows, who starts with the notion of something that is ‘not yet’ there, something that can exist without it being recognized yet. Who, in popular terms,

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from transcript of Access Intimacy letter. A student talked about her own experience with Access Intimacy: “Yes, actually, that the situation for both of us was just there, wasn’t there, or so say yes to the dress, I also mean because, yes, I don’t know, that you also play very much, so it does make me emotional, uhm, with that intimacy, that you don’t feel one with your body and not attractive either, or whatever and that’s something that is so far away and not seen as possible either, sniffs her nose and continues emotionally: but that you then have such a moment, oh I have to take a breath.....that you can enjoy such a moment together or something, without that, you know each other that it is something painful but yeah, that’s ok too. I really don’t know if this fit at all, but yes.”

thinks ‘outside of the binary’ of right or wrong, professional or unprofessional, beautiful or ugly.

Your teaching approach reminds me of an article I read recently by disabled designer and teacher Kaiya Waerea. In the article, called ‘The Liberatory Potential of Teaching Design from a Body in Pain’, Waerea describes the difficulties she faces as a disabled design teacher, but also the abundance it can carry, the potential there is for huge possibility. She says: “Design, with its unique ability to move between the everyday and the systemic, is a necessary tool for disability justice, and the worlding that is required to reorient towards such futurity.” (Waerea, 2022)

Moving between the everyday and the systemic is definitely something I see in your practice. Suddenly these students, who are mostly young kids, freshly graduated from high-school, that are offered a broad range of critical theory that they can apply to themselves as well as to their surroundings. This is also a type of embodiment: making the personal political, but also making the political personal.

Further on in the article Waerea quotes bell hooks from her collection of essays

*Teaching to Transgress*: “Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, not the body.” (hooks, 1994, p. 91) Now is she right!

In the context of disability, we’ve been talking about the idea of performing disability in the name of awareness or art. We’ve all seen it: a non-disabled person is supposed to ‘mimic’ a disability by wearing a certain costume that limits their movement, wear a pair of glasses that make their vision less optimal, use a wheelchair for a day. The list goes on. I do not believe in this kind of acting and find it a cheap and even appalling way of impersonating ‘the’ (or rather ‘a’) disability experience. Disability cannot be mimicked, it cannot be a hat you put on and take off when you feel like it. Disability is a lived experience, not an experiment.

So what, for me, does embodiment actually mean when we talk about teaching and art?

Maybe this definition of embodiment is as fluid as the definition of Access Intimacy. As you so beautifully state in your letter, Access Intimacy isn’t a set definition, but rather a fluid embodied experience that can flow in and out of the body. Something that almost happens without you having to work for it and appears without a warning. Or - which is maybe even a more abstract way of looking at it - is it a question of reaching Kairos, finding or feeling the golden moment? I do not think embodiment only means that you are carrying your own lived experience with you, but you are also acknowledging this experience as something with tremendous meaning. Even though I cannot take away my disability, I do not think my embodied experience looks the same every day.

Writing these words down, I wonder about your definition of embodiment. We talk about it often, but what does it feel like?

**Dear Mira,**

Kairos, I had to look that up, as I am not trained in Greek mythology. As I understand it, it is about seizing the moment when it introduces itself. I like the active changeable character of it. Something you have to see as a chance being offered, because when it passes it is gone.

I think your lesson landed in our institute at the right time to be seized by others who understood the importance and urgency of what we are creating together. To ask for access to it and to connect us with other people in the institute; practicing interdependency.

I am very grateful you brought the Feminists against Ableism collective into the academy.

In my own practice as a costume designer I have just been awarded the Proscenium prize (Everaert). The reason I am mentioning this is because the jury report actually mentions my activism

“... In addition, in the social debate and her work as a teacher, she has been passionately campaigning for more inclusiveness and gender equality in the sector for years.”

I do think I owe this award to the Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and climate injustice protests. A lot of our (educational) institutions are starting to understand that there is a lot of knowledge being archived and pro-

duced within activism. As you stated in your second letter: “I do not think embodiment only means that you are carrying your own lived experience with you, but you are also acknowledging this experience as something with tremendous meaning”

You keep me on my toes when it comes to disability justice issues. What an ableist expression that is. This balancing on your toes. Abled bodies know what that feels like and connect it to alertness, because otherwise you will fall. It's a doing again not something fixed. That standing on your toes means that it makes you extra aware of something, an issue. So, is this what you mean when it comes to putting on prostheses to understand what it means to approach a disabled, embodied every day experience as a one-off event, rather than the structural difference it encompasses? Why it is dehumanizing? You give such a beautiful example of an interdependent balancing act in your Access Intimacy class (Hasselt, 2022), that I suppose you know exactly what keeping someone on their toes means. Even when maybe your body is not able to stand on its toes physically, you do know what this embodiment means.

As you see I am trying to answer this question on what we are talking about when we speak of embodiment.

I think that there is a multiplicity of embodiments.

And that I am most interested what bodies do in the world. What they perform or are supposed to perform. How I want the new generations of designers to become aware of what power structures we are reproducing through our embodiments and how to (en)counter that.

You captured that beautifully and awkwardly in the videoclip you made on all the (unsolicited) comments you get while you are out in public space. You use this video to introduce yourself and the way people seem to only understand your appearance through a very ableist and patronizing lens. In our last zoom conversation you asked me what I thought when I saw you the first time. I wasn't sure how to answer that question. You also asked the students what they thought of your appearance. They all said they were fine with it. No awkwardness. Could that be true? That when you are there in person as a teacher the whole question of patronizing you or dehumanizing you doesn't come into the room?

And how are gestures of care different from patronizing? Since we made a video lesson out of the Access Intimacy class you also said that you find it important that you are sometimes not physically there, so that that people may be more honest in their reactions. To me that poses a dilemma because if there is more diversity in the room a lot of power structures come to the surface and can be understood and dismantled. The "Nothing About Us Without Us" is a very powerful way to have different bodies and their marginalized stories take the stage (Charlton, 1998, p. 210). To make room and hold space.

**Dear Carly,**

I'm writing you right after the research group meeting about embodiment we're both in. The group, consisting of other teacher-researchers from different depart-

ments in the school is a monthly get together in which we (teacher-researchers) can share our current ideas, questions and discuss what's on our mind. This time we shared our last two letters with the group. I was present online, you were in the room with the others. As soon as we finished reading, the room was quiet, in disbelief almost. When I broke the silence by asking them what was the matter, I noticed a few red-teary faces. We are touched, someone said. Another teacher said: "my tears are because I feel like I'm understanding a complexity now". It's moving to hear a comment like that. Not just because it's great to hear that your work is being seen and appreciated, but mostly because this complexity is exactly what I hope to underline when talking about embodiment and disability. As I said before there is no such thing as "the disability experience". The pleasure, luck and fullness but also the grief, rage and sorrow it can carry take place in complexity. My pleasure doesn't come from trying to walk or stand, my rage doesn't come from not being able to walk.

In my last letter I asked you about what embodiment means to you and I'm now slowly starting to feel that writing these letters to you, reading the letters I receive from you are also an embodied experience. I loved your thoughts about embodiment. You said you're most interested in what bodies do in the world. What they perform or what they're supposed to perform. Your work as a costume designer perpetuates that thought so well. The mixture of bright colors, shapes and camp combinations in your costumes bring up so many questions about per-

formance and bodies. They also straightforwardly make me happy. It's the simple pleasures.

I don't think I can react to all of your questions in this letter and I'm also not sure if I'm supposed to. These letters are an exploration of our thinking and in exploring, a lot remains open. But there are some questions you posed that I would like to touch on. Firstly, your question about how gestures of care are different from being patronizing. My personal answer would be, once again, not so clear/nuanced. These things are subtle. The difference can be the tone of someone's voice, the way they look at you, the force they use when touching. I think it has a lot to do with autonomy and that you feel that the other realizes it's a two-way street. Talking about interdependence. I know that your answer to this question would probably be different. Would you like to share your ideas with me? I would also be interested in how queerness plays a role in this, because I think it does.

You mention in your letter that I pose the question "what does my appearance evoke" to you and the students. Let me be clear that I don't ask this to corner people or to make them uncomfortable. I know there is always a moment of unease that my appearance effectuates and I want to echo this in the room. I want to allow the uncomfortable truth of discomfort to be acknowledged. I want to be able to talk about the discomfort not because I want to take it away (although I hope at one point it does disappear) but because my experience is that my existence can function as a mirror. For students this mirror is an important exploration.

In my life I had many instances in which I was in a public space where strangers would approach me with tears in their eyes or just straight up crying. Even though it disturbs my otherwise ordinary day to deal with the emotions of strangers, it also fascinates me. Just looking at me apparently brings people in a state of terror, angst, anxiety, confusion. My analysis for this might be too short cut, but I think I embody mortality for a lot of people.

Years ago, I spoke to someone who had a wheelchair bed. He lay down the whole day on a bed on wheels and moved horizontally. He told me how his horizontal appearance resulted in people running away from him, being so very scared that they avoided interaction with him at all costs. We jokingly looked at each other until he said concisely "I don't understand, I'm just a person lying down".

A body that functions in a different way and is something most of us fear  
Debility is the preamble to death. Or is it?

**Dear Mira,**

This week I jokingly send you a drawing of a bird that says: "Stop asking all these difficult questions all of the time!"

The joke, however, is on us. We need to ask the difficult questions and I was also very touched that reading our letters out loud made the teachers cry and formulate that the tears were about understanding a complexity.

Could it be that debility is not the proximity to death but proximity to our shared humanity?

Like there is knowledge in not fitting in? And in staying vulnerable, not trying to become part of the dominant rules by toughening up?

As you show us through this statement: “My pleasure doesn't come from trying to walk or stand, my rage doesn't come from not being able to walk”. There seems to be a whole domain there to start practicing interdependency by finding good questions.

It reminds me of the beautiful statements that Patty Berne brings up together with Stacey Milbern in the video conversation you use in the lesson (Invalid, 2017): *MY BODY DOESN'T OPPRESS ME, SOCIETY DOES.*

*Or if I have my access needs met I am functionally not disabled.*

*Or My body is fun.*

This brings me to your question how queerness is a part of this. Every body that does not fit into the dominant norm, and in our case that would be, white cis preferably male, able and hetero sexual and European, and not to forget young, all these categories that are being used, often subconsciously, to make you feel you are failing to be a part of this norm, are luckily being questioned now. So, as soon as you start to understand that you have value, as Patty Bern makes you understand through the quotes above, and there could be an exchange of values instead of spending a lifetime of fitting in, then that opens up

a whole other way for how we interact and how society could be organized. That we need each other.

I do want to come back to the care for a bit. You mentioned that trying to experience abled bodies trying to experience disability for an hour or so was very dehumanizing. In Superfest, the disability film festival I saw someone training a personal care assistant (Harris). She had to be catheterized and the PA decided to try that on her own body first. I felt that it was important to understand what she had to do by trying and experiencing that herself first, but it also reminded me of how little we have to know about our own bodies as long there is nothing wrong with it within the abled bodied society we live in.

I must admit that I do know I don't pee through my vagina, but would not be able to pinpoint exactly where the peehole is or what it looks like. Just because it functions fine.

I just saw this video on Instagram where a female reporter asks cis men in the street if they know if women have to take their tampon out if they want to pee. They all answered yes!

It was a video about menstruation poverty (Rad). My own naivety scares me sometimes as the complete ignorance of those men. I am not sure where I am heading with this, but I think it is about how important it is to learn of and from other embodiments by actually wanting to listen to other embodied stories than our own. To dare to want to know the body you desire or reject.

Stepping away from universalism and essentialism into the particular and chaotic experiences of the other.

Not to solve anything but to exchange. And to value those stories as knowledges, not to define them, but to let them touch us and through that make new works of art, because they come with an understanding that failing might be exactly where to start creating (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 45–60).

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# Collective listening as survival: how to be not okay together

*Rajni Shah*

The writing that follows is a series of personal reflections on “listening” – a term which, for me, refers to an embodied attentive state, including, but not limited to, the ears. I write from my own experiences as a trans non-binary person of colour, and reflect specifically on the ways in which listening work relates to the anti-racist and anti-colonial one. Within the writing, certain words are hyperlinks. These are offered as moments of dialogue – moments where you are invited, if you wish, to read other texts that are in a relationship with a particular word, phrase, or idea that is linked. At the end of the section titled “4. Portals” there is a short list of links to artists and authors, who are directly mentioned in the text, as well as a list of further references, in case they are of interest.

This piece was originally written for the Journal of Sonic Studies.

You arrive. Into a room full of people. And instead of a chit-chat or networking or friendworking, you stay quiet, listening in. You are still, noticing the currents of the room, the way it makes you feel to be among others. And you remember this:

It matters what kind of body you bring.  
It’s not the first time you remember this.

You look around. You notice your own assumptions attaching themselves to other people in the room. You notice your breath moving in and out of your body.

Into the body,  
into the world,  
into the body,  
into the world,  
into the body,  
into the world,  
into the body.

And then someone catches your eye, and the moment is gone.

## 1. Learning the shape of racist rooms

I had said I was going to give a talk called “listening for home.” Here is what I had written in the blurb:

Rajni Shah will share some of their thinking around (and experiences of) listening, racism, safety and song. The performance will include a chance to engage with Rajni’s new book and accompanying zines. It will be reflective, slow and kind. If you often feel marginalised or silenced by more mainstream structures of dialogue and interaction, you are especially welcome.

I still think it sounds pretty good. I mean, I think I would attend a talk with this blurb. Mostly because I do feel “marginalised or silenced by more mainstream structures of dialogue and interaction.” This is one of the rea-

sons I started to focus on listening as a topic of study. Because I had always been too shy to raise my hand during Q&A sessions or any other kind of public conversation. And then one day I finally dared to raise my hand during the Q&A after a panel discussion at a large arts institution in London. But when they called on me, the words that came out of my mouth were apparently in such a different language to the one that was expected that everyone just pretended I had never spoken. I was embarrassed and ashamed. And perhaps more significantly, I was reaffirmed in my theory that it was not a good idea for me to speak in public.

What is strange about this experience is that I am actually very good at speaking in public. Years later, I can tell you that I am articulate, intelligent, and that I am blessed with an easeful and magical relationship with language. Not only this, but even if we’re going for easy wins, I will tell you now that I attended a private Church of England girls’ school in the South of England and an Oxbridge university, so I have had plenty of opportunity to learn the tongue of what would be considered good and articulate English by the kinds of people who moderate talks in London’s art institutions. And yet, when I tried to articulate something, to be part of a conversation about art at said major art institution – and I really was trying in this moment to speak and be heard – I failed.

As I reflected on what had happened, I wondered: what was it about my body, my words, the tone and volume of my comment that made it unintelligible to the other people in the room?

Now I ask: what was it about the shape of listening in that room that meant certain voices could not be heard?

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So I said I was going to give this talk called “listening for home.” But when it came to writing the talk, a feeling of **exhaustion** and disinterest came over me. Mostly, I felt kind of bored by the idea of giving a talk about listening and racism.

Now, what you need to know is that I care immensely about the intersections between listening, anti-racist, and anti-colonial practices. I believe very strongly that the way attention is distributed is political, at every scale. And I love exploring this with other people. It feels like urgent work to me.

And yet, here I was, feeling like the topic was dragging me down.

After I spent some time with this feeling, I realised it was because I have given several talks before on this very topic. And every time I do it, I am more blunt, more clear about the fact that it matters what kind of body you bring. More clear about the fact that I am inviting audience members to reckon with their own listening, their own bodies, their own habits, the very assumptions they are making when they think they understand something or someone. Each time I talk about some listening gathering that I have organised, in which **White-body supremacy** was present, and the extent to which this made

it impossible to do the work of listening. I am clear when I describe them that these were painful experiences. And each time at least one White person will approach me afterwards to tell me: “I loved it. It was so relaxing.”

I think this is where the feeling of boredom came from. It was a deep weariness with naming racism and trying to create healing, and this being taken by some people as a shortcut to feeling good.

This time, instead of going into it, I told the audience about the weariness. And then I began the talk by simply saying: “This room is an experience of racism.”

This room. The one we are in.

This room. Breath in a body of skin.

This room. Alongside all the other rooms.

Shaped by the systems that it is trying to undo.

This is where we begin.

Listening for home.

## 2. Listening Tables

Rooms come in all sizes. At some point I came to realise that the room of my own body is both a reflection of and is creating the rooms around it. Who we are able to be is in large part who we have been invited or allowed to become by those around us. And at the same time, we create what is around us through our listening. Through our attentiveness.

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I became fascinated by tipping point, the tipping points at which listening in and listening out meet each other. The practice of learning how to be tuned in and tuned out at the same time. To be grounded in self and present with others. How is this possible? And how does this relate to the systems within which we operate? The systems and events that have shaped us, shaped our parents, brought our bodies into the world. Our relationships to the lands and waters and plants who sustain us.

In 2018 I was invited to spend some time at the Acts of Listening Lab, which is situated on unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation and within Concordia University. The Lab was just being set up at the time by Luis Carlos Sotelo Castro, who invited me to make a project specifically for that place. It took me a while to arrive to know what I might offer. The Acts of Listening Lab is a dark room with sound equipment and a lighting rig, an excellent room for certain kinds of listening work but a difficult room for conviviality. Across the corridor is another room called the Sun Room. As its name suggests, this room has large windows and receives a lot of light. Slowly, I came up with a plan to create Listening Tables, an invitation for up to 30 people to gather and listen together. A practice of collective reorientation that would involve both rooms.

During the first hour in the Acts of Listening Lab ten people would sit around a table. Microphones at the table. Pretty light hanging in the middle of the room. Those people, the ten, mostly strangers to each other, would be invited to sit together for a full hour and wait

for words to arrive. They were invited to meet across difference through listening.

In the other room, the Sun Room, would be everyone else. There would be papered tables, pens and pencils, plants, cushions, chairs and headphones, through which these people could listen in to the listening conversation that was happening between the ten in the Acts of Listening Lab across the hallway.

Later, in the second hour, we would come together and share food and words.

This was the plan.

I began the evening with an introduction. As part of this introduction I invited us to enter into a process during which we would, together, select who would go into the Acts of Listening Lab, to sit at the table, and who would listen in from the Sun Room. I said something like this:

The work of Listening Tables is about reorientation. It's about the fact that how attention is distributed is political. One way of thinking about it is that it is about what happens when we centre the margins in order to problematise default behaviours. To this end, in considering whether you want to take part in the Table, please ask yourself whether yours is a body that you experience as represented in all its diversity in mainstream media, whether yours is a voice that is heard, that has agency in the world. If so, maybe it is your turn to listen in, to take a different role in order for us to collectively reorient. If yours is a voice that you feel is unheard, unrepresent-

ed, placed at the margins, then you might consider taking your place at the table, even if this feels a little challenging or takes some bravery.

I like to make invitations in this way, clear enough that there is an intention that can be heard, but open enough that each person can gather around that invitation in the ways that resonate for them. Rather than me determining which bodies need to sit at the table, the invitation asks each person to determine for themselves which role they will take on that evening. It was an invitation to both listen in and listen out, to place ourselves at the point where those things meet.

What I didn't say explicitly is that this is an anti-racist practice.

**Racism is a blunt tool** that presents itself in blunt ways. The work of reorientation, of listening, of figuring out how we might even give ourselves a chance of arriving in a room together, is at once subtle and blunt. It is intricate, delicate, demanding work. And it takes time.

What happened during the first Listening Table was both shocking and unsurprising. Whiteness centred itself and co-opted all other narratives in the room. Some people seemed so aware of their bodies and voices in relation to others, and others seemed not to be aware at all, and these behaviours fell devastatingly neatly along lines of racialisation and speaking privilege.

The emotional resonance from that first gathering was so intense that I decided to make the next Listening Table a closed event. I invited those of us who iden-

tified as Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, and who had sat around the table during the first event, to come together. We talked about our experiences during the first Listening Table, and we sat quietly with the emotional residue of it. Later, I invited that same group to attend the remaining two gatherings, and this was the group that sat in the Acts of Listening Lab with the addition of just one guest listener each time.

In the months that followed, I puzzled over what happened during that first Listening Table, wondering what I could have done differently. But I also began to recognise the importance of what happened. Listening work, it turns out, brings to the surface what had already been present. A part of me wanted the Listening Tables to be protected, to be safer than the rest of the world. But the world doesn't only exist outside of us.

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Some years later I am invited to host a listening session inside another institution. This time, it is part of a day-long event for Masters students, many of whom are meeting for the first time. I suggest that it would be a good idea to have two rooms: a BIPOC-only room for those who want it, and a room for everyone else. This is a way of acknowledging **the inevitable effects of coloniality and White-body supremacy** within the institution as well as an attempt to create a safer space for those who have experienced racialisation. I am to host the BIPOC room, and a friend of mine, an experienced artist-facilitator who is

White, will host the other room. This is something I have never done before, and I am curious about how it will affect the listening work that is able to happen.

As we prepare to go into our rooms, I notice that some Black and Brown students look confused, and I ask if I can help them. They express that they are feeling conflicted about which room to choose. I tell them that I cannot make that choice for them, but that they will be welcome in either room.

During the listening session someone in my room describes this conflicted feeling, and others agree that it feels confronting to have to choose between rooms. There is a long stretch of quiet, then someone else says that they really want to know what is being discussed in the other room, the “White” one. There is a strong consensus that people are curious about what is happening in the other room, and that they feel strange about the fact that some people did not have a choice of rooms. I feel it too. I wonder, do the White-bodied people feel that they have been disadvantaged by not having a choice of rooms? Are they discussing Whiteness and privilege? Do they wish they could listen in on what is happening in our room?

Later, when I talk to my friend who has been hosting the other room, they tell me that no one in their room mentioned the BIPOC one. They never once discussed the fact that there was another room. It just was not present in their listening session.

As my friend tells me this, we look at each other. We both recognise, with some devastation, what has hap-

pened. Feelings of erasure are present in my heart, along with their many echoes.

I am shocked and unsurprised.

I realise that once again I have desired to create safety, and what has showed up is a shape of trauma.

The thing I love about listening work is also what confronts me the most: it does not protect me from what is.

### **3. We are capable of so much more**

The title of my PhD was “Experiments in Listening: we are capable of so much more.” The second part – “we are capable of so much more” – was the title of a blog post I had written some years previously, before I began the PhD.

During my viva examination, the title was the first thing we discussed. One of the examiners began by saying: “let’s talk about this”. Clearly, he was a little perturbed that “we are capable of so much more” gave the research soft edges, melting it dangerously close to the field of “self-help.” In response, I talked confidently and passionately about the title. I had no recollection of what I had said until I remembered that there was a recording of the viva. I listen to it and hear myself:

“It’s about that idea that as human beings we are capable of so much more, but that doesn’t mean that we declare more or make more or we’re more productive, necessarily. It’s about values for me. It’s about “what’s

the more?" I want this PhD to be brave. I want it to be practice as research. As much as possible, I want all the aspects of it to be doing the work. And so the title also needs to do that work, which is to maybe challenge something, maybe open up something, but also to be ... kind of beautiful. And kind of demanding in the way that it asks something. It doesn't give everything to the reader, which for me means it also leaves room for the reader to bring their interpretation. The reading is part of the work. The attentive state is part of the work. The reception is part of the work."

Sometimes, you hear a phrase like "we are capable of so much more," and something happens. It lands awkwardly, like a dangerous thing.

Where does that awkwardness come from?

Is it directed at someone?

Does it keep you at a distance from certain kinds of people/writing/places?

Does it keep you tethered?

What kind of writing were you expecting here, and if not this kind, then who told you to expect something different? Does your unease tell you something about your own body and the histories that have shaped it? What does it tell you about your own relationship to kindness or compassion? Safety? Fear? Unrootedness? Softness? Oh, and: Academia? Education? Rigour? Precision? Coloniality? Notice how these words shift meaning when placed in different contexts – how they too, like you, shimmer awkwardly.

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A few years after the viva, I published a book and a series of zines called Experiments in Listening, based on the PhD. When the book came out, I marked the moment with an online launch event. For some reason I felt a strong pull towards reading out loud the blog post that had inspired the original title, even though "we are capable of so much more" no longer featured in the title of the book, and the blog post was a very slight piece of writing that was by then almost ten years old. I couldn't really explain why, but this was what I chose to share as an introduction to the listening work that the book was attempting.

Perhaps the blog post describes a listening stance. Perhaps it is evidence that **the smallest gesture can be transformative**. But really, though I remain sure about the instinct to share the blog post, I gladly still don't have the words to explain why.

Wednesday, 11 July 2012

blog post on [autumnbling.blogspot.com](http://autumnbling.blogspot.com)

There will be no more weather for a while.

I'm on the bus, on my way to the tube and then to the airport, where I'll fly tonight to Hong Kong.

Once I get on the tube, there'll be no more outside weather, just a series of fabricated environments.

One of the last things I see before this encapsulation begins is an old lady sitting at the bus stop in the rain. I am looking out of the bus window, on the lower deck, looking right at her, and I smile. She seems surprised, but she smiles back and gently raises her hand into a tentative wave. I beam and wave back. She beams. Just for a moment, as the bus pulls away, I think – I love human beings.

Sometimes, I love human beings.

And I know she's feeling the same thing.

#### 4. Portals

My life ... has been falling apart for years now. Has yours?

I've been saying “not okay,” “particularly intense,” and “overwhelmed” over and over again, as if these were exceptional circumstances.

But they are not exceptional circumstances. There is a new reality around that means we cannot operate in the ways we used to. I feel it, and recognise it, but have not yet allowed it to transform me.

In some ways, it's all of us. Skin of earth cracking open, human lies floating at the surface.

In many ways, it's not all of us, **and yet.**

Some people have learnt to dance with the cracking earth, and I want to know more about that.

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How do we survive these times? How do we begin to notice racism, xenophobia, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, all those colonialist structures that hold rooms and conversations and families together and apart. How do we notice them and still find ways to survive?

I was so relieved when I discovered Sara Ahmed's description of the feminist killjoy as a figure who appears, whether we like it or not. I have often felt her sidle up to me during a conversation or at an event. She asks whether I am going to speak up when I notice injustices. And as you know, my relationship to speaking up is a little fraught. So I have often spent long moments with the feminist killjoy by my side, wishing she would go away and at the same time feeling so grateful for her allyship. Through her presence I can feel all the other feminist killjoys alongside me.

In 2017, I started something called the Feminist Killjoys Reading Group – a gathering open to anyone who felt some kind of kinship with the figure of the feminist killjoy. We met every other week on unceded Darug lands, in what is colonially known as Western Sydney. In my initial invitation to join the group, I wrote:

I discovered Sara Ahmed's blog just a few years ago, and it has given me huge amounts of courage. I want to share this experience with others, as a way of creating a conversation that does not begin with assumptions based on masculinity and whiteness, but with queerness, colour and a deep commitment to listening.

The reading groups are open to anyone who wants to join in – if you feel too shy, too quiet or too strange for most reading groups, then you are particularly welcome.

During our first session, I read out this quote from the introduction to Ahmed's book, *Queer Phenomenology*:

If we think with and through orientation, we might allow the moments of disorientation to gather, almost as if they were bodies around a different table. We might, in the gathering, face a different way. Queer objects might take us to the very limits of social gathering, even when they still lead us to gather at the table. Indeed, to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering. (2000: 24)

I read the quote in order to set the scene. To say: You are welcome here. To say: We can do this differently. And to say: But it will take work – the work of sustaining wonder about the very forms of social gathering.

How attention is distributed is political. It is the most political thing.

The Feminist Killjoys Reading Group continued for several years, later led collectively by others. In one of the last sessions under my guidance, we spent time reflecting on the work we had done so far. One of the reflections was: We have survived.

We took this as celebration. Survival as celebration. We all knew what this meant. To have continued, to have survived means we are doing the work.

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The force of not being heard, repeatedly, has profound effects on the ways we are in the world. We can witness, undo and relearn. But I believe we can only do this work together.

In 2021 I worked on a slow listening podcast called how to think. It is a podcast that is too slow and too strange for most people. But for some people, in the right moment, it lands. And there, amongst those who find their way to the podcast from different corners of the world, are portals.

We create networks of support, rooms that wish to feel safer, words that stumble.

We build knowledges of solidarity and communities of slow listeners.

We arrive, and arrive, and arrive.

Always in movement.

Together and apart.

Holding impossibilities.

## Notes

The text in this essay includes parts of spoken and written material from the following talks:

<https://autumnbling.blogspot.com/2020/09/breaking-open-work-of-listening-in.html>

<https://iklektikartlab.com/the-listening-academy-performances/>

Other things mentioned in the text that might be of interest:

Experiments in Listening zines and book [<https://www.rajnishah.com/A4-EiL-zines>]

Sara Ahmed's blog [<https://feministkilljoys.com/>]

Feminist Killjoys Reading Group tumblr [<https://feministkilljoys-rg.tumblr.com/>] (an archive of the group's work together including some excellent reading and listening resources)

how to think podcast [<https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/how-to-think/id1552601540>]

\*

The texts above were written outside of academia and do not aspire to be read within that framework. However, I am enthusiastic about sharing resources, and to that end, below is an additional list of some of the writings within and surrounding the world of academia that have informed and inspired my own reflections on listening and being over recent years.

Ahmed, Sara (2000). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. New York: Routledge.

Ahsan, Hamja (2017). *Shy Radicals: The Anti-Systemic Politics of the Introvert Militant*. London: Book Works.

Bassel, Leah (2017). *The Politics of Listening: Possibilities and Challenges for Democratic Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bolatagici, Torika (2013). *The Community Reading Room*.

Cheng, William (2016). *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Dreher, Tanja (2009). "Eavesdropping with Permission: The Politics of Listening for Safer Speaking Spaces." *borderlands ejournal* 8/1: 1–21.

Farinati, Lucia, and Claudia Firth (2017). *The Force of Listening*. Berlin: Errant Bodies Press.

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- Royster, Jacqueline Jones (1996). "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." *College Composition and Communication* 47/1: 29–40.
- Simpson, Audra (2017). "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia." *Postcolonial Studies* 20/1: 18–33.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake (2017). *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. London: Zed Books.
- Trinh, T. Minh-ha (1990). "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference." In Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.), *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, pp.371–75. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books.

# Power, Race and Consent in Performance making

*Joy Mariama  
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*Topic: Race and Consent*

*Section: "On Inclusion & intersectionality"*

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## Terms of Engagement<sup>1</sup>

From *Resisting Spatial Appropriation*<sup>2</sup>

These words and phrases represent concepts and structures that are helpful

### **Acuity (haptic/of senses)**

Haptic acuity

Doing activities with other people in a state of consent requires sharpness, keenness, and sensitivity (aka acuity) with all the senses. Similar to the skills needed to be a potent performer...

### **Affinity Group**

A group of people united by interest and/or common goal, community, also kin/ship. A group of people that share the same qualities that create a community. Sometimes needing separatist spaces due to not being the dominant culture (e.g. PoC, queer, immigrants)

### **Appropriation (noun)**

#### **vs. appropriate (adjective)**

Appropriation is meant here in the sense of "cultural appropriation": taking something that is not yours without accountability or acknowledgement of its origin. 'Taking' and the act of taking is related to a power dynamic and

<sup>1</sup> Keith Hennessy, *White/ness* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Performance Studies UC Davis, 2017). 'Terms of Engagement' is a tactic Hennessy uses to invite the reader to engage with the work through the lens of defining certain terms. I adopt the same tactic here to orient the reader

<sup>2</sup> The terms and definitions in this section are adapted from Joy Mariama Smith's MA Thesis, *Resisting Spatial Appropriation*

a specific [colonial] behavior linked to negotiating consent. We consider appropriate (*adj*) actions to be considerate of pre-existing conditions and necessarily incapable of facilitating appropriation. To dismantle oppressive hierarchies, aim to be appropriate. In the aim to be appropriate the goal is to avoid misappropriation and move towards accountability and appreciation. Accountability and appreciation shift the power dynamic. These terms can be used in conjunction with 'cultural', 'spatial', 'social', and use the adverb form when striving for the appropriate. Eg. 'Culturally appropriate.'

### **Disidentification**

After José Esteban Muñoz<sup>3</sup>, the process or strategy adopted by marginalized communities, primarily those comprising queer and/ or people of color, wherein individuals rework the cultural codes of the mainstream and transform these cultural signposts to accommodate their own needs.

### **Ontological expansiveness**

After Shannon Sullivan<sup>4</sup>, a habit of lived spatiality that white people tend to manifest, resulting in the consideration of white people thinking that all spaces are rightfully available for their inhabitation. (See definition of whiteness below).

<sup>3</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Shannon Sullivan, 'Race, Space and Place' in *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Indiana University Press Bloomington, 2006, pp. 143–166.

## Politicized body

A performing body that does not conform to the dominant white supremacist construct of the norm and therefore is marginalized and othered. The politicized body does not have a choice as to whether it is politicized or not. A politicized body is often also a racialized body, and because of this has a specific relationship to consent with regard to the triangulation with race and power.

## Racialized Aesthetics

The notion that whiteness is part of our concept of aesthetics, and that this construction of aesthetics is preferred. The takeaway here is that aesthetics are racialized. Period.<sup>5</sup>

## Spatial appropriation

In simplest terms, the act of taking up space with no accountability or acknowledgement of who or what was there before you. The action of laying claim or taking ownership of space (think: colonizer) because you believe that that space belongs to you anyway, either consciously or unconsciously (read: entitlement)

## Whiteness vs. Whiteliness

Whiteness is a position and physical attribute of a construct of race, whereas 'whiteliness', a term used by Sullivan to make a distinction between learned behaviors

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<sup>5</sup> Monique Roelofs, "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vice Versa?" *White on White/Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 83-124. Rpt. in *The Philosophy of Race*, ed. Paul Taylor, Vol. 3. *Race-ing Beauty, Goodness, and Right* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 291-327.

and physical or biological/genetic attributes, is a set of characteristics that this construct manifests, eg: ontological expansiveness.<sup>6</sup>

## An invitation to dance

Imagine that this text demonstrates conscientious consent behavior in itself.

There is no right way to show up as a reader. The offering of the article is not given with rules that must be followed a certain way.

Non-linearity: choice of how to receive the language level is up to the reader. Where to enter, when to leave, how to absorb, reflect, incorporate, reject...

Text is a demonstration of how to *give* in a generous, clear way.

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<sup>6</sup> Veronika Timashkova, DAI MFA Art Praxis graduate, coined this term. Personal conversation, 2017.

For example: The reader could simply look at areas of text vs "empty" space on page as pattern and graphic/visual information. Eye/mind navigates shapes: the reader decides when and how to engage in language level.

For example: List of sections that reader could jump to.

Interactive text. Is there a way to create an analog of on-line reading vis-a-vis hyperlinks that allow one to jump around to various places in the article?

## Introduction

This essay aims to catalyze readership with thinking/feeling.

*I really want to argue for a "full-bodied intellect" and leave behind language like "let's feel before we think," or "let's be either emotional or logical," or let's get all feely and somatic and then apply our intellect. Instead of thinking about how we can be empathetic before applying an intellectual approach, can we say that an intellect without empathy is an inhuman intellect?*

*Consent is commonly thought of as yes or no but it's really not that. My point is — in the non-existent discourse on consent — the baseline or status quo is 'this is consent': yes/no. and i'd rather talk about a consent culture or the relationality in consent, or i'd rather look at consent through the lens of critical race theory and intersectionality.*

Dear reader, if you are reading this text you are most likely in a position of power, privilege and access. If you are reading this text then you are submerged, implicated, complicit, affected by white supremacy culture. You may be white, non-white or a person of color.

But let's start by acknowledging that the majority of the people reading this text (oh and maybe while we are naming things, maybe the majority of people writing text for this publication are white).

~~How do we change that?~~ Why is it important in this text to name that the majority of people reading this text are white, the editors of this text are white, when the author of this text — i am talking about myself — is a queer, non-binary, immigrant, and Black with indigenous to the Americas and African diasporic ancestry; also krip, non-European, poor, palpable, orphan, educated, and femme.

What could this mean?

Can you take a moment to locate yourself so that in order to see how we/you and i can relate to each other through this text?

I gave you a short list of over-simplified ~~qualifiers-signifiers~~ intersections. Do you know any other Black people, queer people? People who are disabled/differently abled (remember not all disabilities are visible).

Do you know any \_\_\_\_\_ people?  
Why do you think that is?

Do you think that the answer to that question has a relationship to power/consent/race?

What is dominant culture? implicit in 'dominant' is the notion of power. Who is in the position of power between you and me and this text?

Can we acknowledge the potential for various shape-shifting hierarchies that influence and inform our perception, formation of biases (conscious or unconscious), assumptions, and more.

This acknowledgement is where we begin.

If we are going to collectively work towards anti-violence, anti-discrimination, and supporting diversity — starting there is an important (but not popular) choice.

If we (you & I) (the editors and contributors to this publication, project) believe and are committed to the need for change in the 'systems, structures' policies and practices... with regard to social safety, inclusion, accessibility and sustainability. Acknowledgement is a good place to start... not just for thinking, but for taking action.

Acknowledgement of the problems/problematics is also a step in our collective accountability.

What is meant by 'inclusion' and 'intersectionality'. What actions are you taking to work towards your own under-

standing of these terms and moreover, to actively support their subsequent positive impact? How are you, yourself implicated in these terms.

What i was thinking about now is how to really get the point across that people's lived experience and ways of perceiving are different (based on their position/ality) — and it's ok, and how do we do the work of acknowledging this?

Some people don't like the word 'racism'— those people are usually white people.

Or maybe people who are not or do not self identify as people of color or not white...

Why? — Because it often evokes shame, embarrassment, guilt and more.

Shame and guilt, coincidentally often prohibit accountability.

shame/guilt/embarrassment are not comfortable feelings. Nor should they be, and the belief or supposition that ~~everyone needs to be comfortable~~ white people need to be comfortable is harmful. Oppression, discrimination, phobia, alienation, isolation, vilification are also places of discomfort... and yet and yet...

How to begin and open a conversation:

From thinking on racism and whiteness in collectivity, in separatist spaces and collectively, i learned clarity and

complexity... or how clarity can hold complexity and also inviting the text to be a space of discomfort, and (some of) what is needed to enter a place of discomfort.

What came up: (flip it and reverse it)

Is the practice of having separatist groups for BIPOC a way to

- Center whiteness
- Center non-white/BIPOC
- Nourish and strengthen communities of color/non-white communities and counteract the colonialist strategy of divide and conquer
- Create space for white people to practice solidarity (not at the expense of poc)
- Ensure that white people are not confronted with their own discomfort when talking about racism...

To start: start naming things/don't be afraid to name things.

Name: race, power, and consent - this triangle is a thing in performativity

Name: antiracism work and anti-blackness

Name: power. it's a thing

Name: bipoc, and nonwhite vs white

Name: white supremacy culture

Name: your own position

Next: start some actions/don't be afraid to move

Look at: context

Move towards: action

Move towards: solidarity

Move towards: discomfort, confusion, discernment, differentiation, accountability, growth

Move away from: bullshit

## Body-based technologies

Our body is the most ancient and the most sophisticated technology we have. And let us not forget about the root of this word and how it is rooted in art. Technology is not just machines, computers, or the internet, it includes our mind. It used to mean a specific way of engaging in art/performance/craft. So please take these body based technologies with that in mind.

The use of our technology is technique. We say a dancer or actor has "good technique" when they can "play" their body like a musical instrument, expressing themselves with nuance, range, and potency. Techniques are also ways of doing things. The techniques below are offered as a way to use our technology (our body/mind) to level up our skills in the service of a more complete and deep understanding and practice of consent.

The aim (again) is to look at consent the practice of consent through various body based skills. In practicing this can we cultivate things such as saying 'no' and embodying a 'no' that can be felt, not just autonomously but in relation or collectively.

What is an embodied and skillful way to cultivate feeling/sensing a 'no'?

### Tasks:

**Karaoke score**

**Hug role play**

**High Five**

**Draw me**

### Task 1: Karaoke score

This is a score for a social transformative practice of karaoke. This is a score that you can try in some setting. You can use this invitation as a template for your own. This was 'Queer Karaoke' as an exercise to look at and point out sites of consent, and practice consent strategies.

Questions: Is the language affirmative? Is there space for multiple ways of relating, are there more than 2 choices presented? Is there care embedded? Is it flexible and adaptive? This is a consent exercise, how? Try it try it!

Karaoke as a pedagogical approach, as self portraiture, as transformative justice, as anti-racism, as catharsis, as....

*IN TWO DAYS!!! let me know! (if you are not in the Netherlands but your friends are that like karaoke you can fwd this email)*

Dear community:

I want to invite you to a private karaoke event! [insert date and time here] It's a celebration 🎉.

I want to extend a special invitation to you to come do karaoke with me! or come watch me sing karaoke 🎤🎤 it's been a while, and I am boosting my social stamina. 💪

Please join me if you can, it would mean a lot to me. [insert special conditions or access needs here] We want everyone to feel safe! Also if you want to know how many people are coming, just ask!

Please know: we want everyone to feel safe with regards to [insert special conditions/access needs here] 🙄. There will be no shaming or bullshit.

Nothing fancy, or everything fancy. Up to you/come as you are. ❤️

All the info is below AND what I need from you is RSVP by [insert date and time]

To help us cover our cost (of the rental because yes it is privately rented) please either, make a small donation

(there will be a jar) or or or come prepared to buy drinks or snacks. 🙏.

*You are welcome to bring a friend, as long as you tell me and [insert special conditions/access needs here]*

when you RSVP, do let me know if you want to come later [insert time frame here] or early [insert a second time frame here] just to get a sense of flow 🌊

Song list suggestion:

[insert your favorite songs, anthems, crowd pleasers, obscure songs here — songs can be sung collectively or individually — you don't need to have any singing experience to do karaoke]

## Task 2: Hug role play

Consent is space for the no. With no explanation, judgment, projection, emotional response, commentary, guilt, shame, insecurity, questioning, invalidation, dehumanization, critique,... expectations, hierarchy, obligation, needed. Below is a skeleton of a text for a role play of different ways to respond to the offer of a hug. You can start with the options listed below and then (together) come up with alternatives to these responses. The ellipses [...] are in place for you to give your own response. Try to feel/listen to your body and what information it gives, specifically physiological responses.

## Options for this role play:

'Do you want a hug?' 'No.'

(end scene)

Or

Alt 1:

'Do you want a hug?' 'No.'

'Are you sure?'

(pause)<sup>7</sup>

Alt 2:

'You don't want a hug from me?!' 'No, Thank you.'

(pause)

Alt 3:

(((gives cute puppy eyes))) ...

(pause)

<sup>7</sup> These pauses are for you to stop and reflect on the response. Have you gotten a response like this before? Did it feel like an appropriate response? Keep in mind: „No” is a complete sentence.

Alt 4:

((gives the person/you a kiss instead))) ...

### Task 3: High Five

With a partner try to give/receive the perfect high five. When you achieve it have a conversation about what was needed in order to achieve this.

Level up: as a more advanced option you can add a secret handshake. With a partner, develop a secret handshake that begins with the high five. Collaboratively choreograph the secret handshake and teach it to others in your community. When you have the handshake have a conversation about what was needed to achieve this, and what strategies you used.

Hints: authenticity, comradery/community, care, collaboration, spontaneity, adaptability, joy...

*Aside: you know when you go to high-five someone, and they are like 'psych!'<sup>8</sup> What is high 5 but a brief consensual moment in time, a feeling, an action, a relationship, a collaboration, a heightened state of awareness. What a negotiation. How do you make a successful authentic high five. What happens in a high five if you imagine the mechanics*

<sup>8</sup> The spelling of this word depends on which region or the Northeast of the US, tri-state area, Philadelphia, you are from. And means just kidding, or is a joke, way of playful reneging.

*of it. How would you do it? The perfect<sup>9</sup> high five. There is something about the timing, the weight sharing, the sound, and more when constructing the most excellent high five. What if that is a basic embodied consent practice?*

### Task 4: Draw me (feelings drawing)

Unlike the wheel of consent, or any other wheels as diagrams, I invite you to use graphic representation of the relationships between race/racialized experience and consent practice. Via the/a visual representation of potential dynamics.

Consider the following:

How being darker skinned relates to context

How being darker skinned relates to systems of oppression

How being darker skinned influences how idea or consent is perceived and experienced

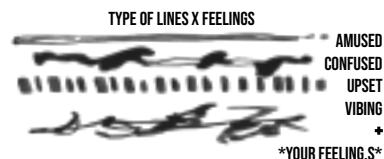
This graphic is offered as a utilitarian, practical tool that can be used between 2 or more people or even in a group. It is meant to be used to clarify a position in relation to consent. It can be used conversationally to raise awareness, but also concretely to demonstrate changes in perception/position. This tool is just that, it is a tool. Feel free to make a copy of it and use it as a template and create your own version. It could be used as a daily morning

<sup>9</sup> There is no such thing as perfect. Maybe consider your own personal collective idea of excellence, or collective idea of excellence

practice, as a basis for theoretical analysis, or to spark a conversation with your kid/elder/friend...

# DRAW ME

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ON THE SCALE  
 TOTAL THE SUM OF THE ANSWERS  
 INDICATE YOUR SCORES ON THE "ME" SCALE  
 HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT EACH SET OF QUESTIONS? CHOOSE ONE TYPE OF LINE OR MORE, AND EXPRESS IT BY CONNECTING CONSENT TO POWER, POWER TO RACE AND RACE TO CONSENT.



-2 = NEVER -1 = RARELY 0 = SOMETIMES 1 = OFTEN 2 = ALWAYS

## CONSENT

DO YOU CARE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE ?	
HOW OFTEN DO YOU SAY NO ?	
DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE TO SET BOUNDARIES ?	
HOW OFTEN DO YOU FEEL OBLIGED TO DO SOMETHING ?	
HOW OFTEN DO YOU CHECK WITH PEOPLE THAT YOU LOVE ?	
CONSENT SCORE	<input type="text"/>

## POWER

HOW OFTEN ARE YOU PUT IN A CATEGORY THAT IS MARGINALIZED ?	
ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO DO EXTRA LABOR COMPARED TO OTHER PEOPLE ?	
HOW OFTEN DO PUBLIC SPACES FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE TO YOU ?	
DO PEOPLE COME TO YOU TO EXPLAIN SOMETHING THAT YOU ALREADY KNOW ?	
HOW OFTEN DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR OPINIONS ARE LESS VALUED BY OTHER PEOPLE ?	
POWER SCORE	<input type="text"/>

## RACE

HAVE YOU EVER HAVE A NON-WHITE TEACHER ?	
DO YOU FEEL LIKE THERE IS A LACK OF REPRESENTATION OF NON-WHITE PERSONS ?	
HOW OFTEN ARE YOU AROUND PEOPLE WHO HAVE A DIFFERENT ETHNICITY THAN YOU ?	
HOW OFTEN ARE YOU MISTAKEN FOR AN ETHNICITY THAT YOU ARE NOT ?	
DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAVE FEWER OPPORTUNITIES BECAUSE OF YOUR RACE ?	
RACE SCORE	<input type="text"/>

## "ME"

(OPEN TO IMPRECISE INDICATIONS, E.G. CONSENT - 7,5)

TOTAL CONSENT / POWER / RACE

## Correspon/dance- excerpt 1

This is an excerpt/paraphrase/fictionalized account of an email/skype/correspondence I received from a designer I asked to work with me on a graphic for this article/essay/text. The text of their email is in Amatic SC while my ~~critical~~ ~~emotional~~ edited/fictional response is in **bold**. I include this semi-fictional correspondence for the following reasons: it demonstrates a type of exchange, a line of thinking etc. while at the same time provides an ~~opening~~ ~~to~~ insight into what I want to work on and how.

The outcome of this exchange is that I did end up working with this designer, and you can find their work in the Body-based Technologies section 'Draw me'.

In a roundabout way, how do we develop acuity in all the senses that are engaged when moving through consent? What skills need to be cultivated in order to talk about how you/we are feeling, emotionally and physically? What language do I/we need to develop? For example, starting with the notion of touch, as maybe it is a sense that can be ~~commonly perceived and imagined~~, I can easily perceive and imagine. But working on touch and haptic acuity is only one sense/ one dimension/ one aspect, ~~one degree~~ of the 'sensing' part of consent (con+sentire)— there can be haptic, visual, mental, acuity and more. There are multiple senses and multiple combinations of these — it is this occurrence that makes consent always already dynamic. Drawing one's feelings is one way to work on multi-sense acuity in relation to consent.

**happy to hear from you. and i hope work is not too bananas tonight**

**let me see i had a thought while i was sleeping too about the project which was checking in with how you feel when doing something**

**so if we take your 'draw me' idea**

**can you think about adding some rules/criteria for line weight, or quality of line**

**eg: unsure/i don't know/doubtful could be a dashed line**

**anxious/nervous/agitated - zig zag line**

**baseline - solid line**

**soft/calm/spacious - cloud scallop line**

**then the drawing also has different line qualities and one could start to think what is it when a zigzag/jagged edge meets a dashed line? and that could lead to a conversation**

**we can have a video call about this if you want/or it makes sense**

**i am really happy to be working with you on this**

FEELING/ QUALITIES OF LINES NOTE THAT YOU GAVE ME VIA EMAIL THE OTHER DAY. BUT I'M WONDERING WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THE FEELING, IS IT A CLEAR QUESTION? IS IT THE GAME? IS IT EACH CATEGORIES?

THE TASK OF DEFINING A SET OF FEELINGS THAT GIVE SHAPE TO GRAPHIC SEGMENTS IS A BIT TRICKY FOR ME, BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHICH FEELINGS TO USE OR NOT.

RIGHT NOW I'M THINKING ABOUT TWO POSSIBILITIES:

- A SET LIST OF FEELINGS WITH A CLEAR SOURCE, IT WOULD LOOK LIKE A SIMPLE INFO-GRAPHIC WITH DIFFERENT TYPE OF LINES.

- OR AN INSTRUCTION THAT WOULD GIVE FREEDOM TO DRAW/CONNECT THE DOTS DIFFERENTLY IN BETWEEN EACH SECTION.

I'M THINKING ABOUT HOW EVERYONE HAS A VARIETY OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH DRAWING AND HOW IT WILL LOOK DIFFERENT FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER ANYWAY. BUT I DO AGREE THAT PUTTING DIFFERENT LINE QUALITIES BASED ON FEELINGS COULD CREATE AN INTERESTING LAYER OF READING.

**Cis white man/whiteness**

The cis white male and whiteness needs attention. For the project of our collective responsibility to support the unlearning of certain toxic/harmful behaviors as a community.

Can we talk about it?

Is it possible to talk about whiteness (the behavior) without once again centering the comfort, fragility, naivety, innocence of the white? Can the same be said for white masculinity?

Why is there femme/xeno/trans/negro phobia?

Read: there is femme/xeno/trans/negro phobia. When you see it name it, and move away from being complicated and towards solidarity, awareness, compassion and understanding.

Fear is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

The cis white man and whiteness must be discussed if we (you & I) are going to have a holistic view of the conundrum of consent/race/power.

The idea of taking up less space, having agency, etc as it relates to race, and power is part of both patriarchy and colonialism, and white supremacy culture. All of which, we are all implicated in. What can we do to alleviate eradicate this?

It is no longer the moment for the imbalance of labor (reproductive, invisible, emotional or otherwise) with the scales tipped towards the cisgender heterosexual white (european) male doing none of the work. It is no longer the time for the cis white man to say 'i didn't know any better, please teach me.' It's time to push the scales in the other direction. White men do more work while taking up less space.

To put it another way, if you are white, what are you doing to unlearn and stop the behaviors inherent in white supremacy culture, and how are you working towards uplifting, centering, supporting and being accountable towards minoritarian communities?

*—take a minute to think about this and then really answer—*

Consider the following:

Eg: a white man taking up space vs. a black man taking up space vs. a brown trans a femme, what are the codes (social codes) in relation to power. What does taking up space mean here?

Destabilization of power [=necessary].

~~skin~~ Color/race, lived experience, and access to power can form unconscious patterns of perception, which then becomes a trope (embedded in tropes is a sort of normativity<sup>10</sup>) or common images of the/a dominant culture— think advertisement—where there is a dominant [+], e.g. representations of power being white cis heterosexual men performing a certain type of masculinity... which is linked to a/our construction of aesthetics which are racialized.

What does the control of aesthetics have to do with power... and who has that control? (collective vs. individual).

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<sup>10</sup> There is no normal. Or normal does not exist. It—like race, class, gender, or sexuality—is a construct. Maybe what I mean here is „dominant“ normative.

We need to consider the tradition of confrontation, provocation, and rules-breaking in the performing arts. It's part of our artistic history. Our consent practice needs to be critical of who is allowed to transgress, and how. Take this scenario, for example: Performing artists doing a video shoot inside a museum are asked not to touch a certain piece of art, created by an Indigenous artist that includes a scaffold. The director of the project is a nonbinary African-American. One of the artists in the project is a cis hetero white European male. All of the artists agree to the condition of not touching the scaffold. During the video shoot, while the videographer is filming, the white male dances on the scaffold. What do you imagine the responses of the project director, the videographer, the museum curator would be? What should they be? Who is consenting to what?

Or: Performing artists doing a video shoot inside a museum are asked not to touch a certain piece of art, created by a white European queer female that includes a scaffold. The director of the project is a white American male. One of the artists in the project is a cis hetero African-American male. All of the artists agree to the condition of not touching the scaffold. During the video shoot, the white male dances on the scaffold. What do you imagine the responses of the project director, the videographer, the museum curator would be?

Or: [dear reader: Insert identity scenario here...]

## Correspon/dance: excerpt 2

This is an excerpt/paraphrase/fictionalized account of an email/skype/correspondence I received from a designer I asked to work with me on a graphic for this article/essay/text. The text of their email is in Times New Roman while my critical emotional edited/fictional response is in bold. I include this semi-fictional correspondence for the following reasons: it demonstrates another type of exchange...

The outcome of this exchange is that I did not end up working with this designer.

I often think about how offering is not clean, real, authentic, if there is no right of refusal. You can't consent "Yes" if you can't say "NO."

Studies of consent must therefore could focus on the areas where we are making assumptions that create limits that are NOT agreed upon. Assumptions often are subconscious (and everybody makes them). So study of consent should help us bring unconscious assumptions to the surface so they can be dealt with. For the purposes of this article assumptions around race particularly.

hello dear Joy,

Thank you for forwarding the brief! Having reviewed, I've had a few questions:

1. What is consent? Does intellect negate consent? Are intersectionality and critical race practice located outside of intellectual operations?

**this is three questions!**

**what is consent**

**does intellect negate consent? - what do you mean? 'no' i don't understand what you mean about 'intellectual operations'**

**here is my rework:**

**is consent thinking based (mind) or feeling based (body)**

**how are intersectionality and CR' present in body based/ lived experience?**

*Aside: dear reader beware of the tendency to separate mind from body, or thinking from feeling. I want to offer here an invitation to not only a hybridized but integrated holistic approach. Resist the binary, as a practice and look for 'the third thing' always, as a pedagogical approach. What are the options beyond the two presented. In the case of consent, the technology techknowlogy/knowledge base I want us to work from is derived from the understanding and building upon the many layers/types/registers of knowledge that we have and how to use them in concert. To put it another way, how do we cultivate and practice building a culture of consent in various context that whose foundation is rooted in thinking/feeling/otherwise?*

2. What is the problem? E.g., what does the ideally consented communicative act achieve, as opposed to the in-

tellectual approach? (might not be clear to me bc I'm not entirely familiar with the theory you deal with)

**there is no problem, only a search for a deeper understanding.**

**raise sensitivity and awareness - via emotion and body based information along with thinking (thinking is what i think you mean by intellect)**

**my rework: what is your goal?**

**does demonstrating a consent dynamic help you reach your goal as an alternative to just thinking about consent (doing instead of thinking, practice BEFORE theory)**

3. Is the game required? To me, a game or other representation-oriented form seems a codification, which is essentially a process that creates categories to clarify distinctions between relevant positions — e.g. black/white, rich/poor etc. In other words, codification converts the form of knowledge from embodied to the largely representational, which seems the opposite to what you are trying to achieve. Additionally, there is a caveat which I came across in the work of logicians who also deal with codification is that it can never capture in a narrative form the whole of the embodied knowledge. Some breadcrumbs always fall between the cheeks (esp. when, as you mention here, the attempt is made to overlay multiple abstraction schemas)

**no.**

**my rework: i cannot really rework this question, as you state an opinion around codes, representation and embodiment.... i think you are talking about a problem of coding embodied knowledge - i don't see this as a problem. do you?**

4. Diagram vs. the game as the standalone project? The concern is that there are two things that could be done here. (1) a diagram that illustrates the ideas you explore in the paper. (2) a game, which is a standalone tool. The (1) is a design commission, e.g. you can scribble the sketches and then ask someone who knows how to make nice-looking diagrams to create one in the style your piece requires. (2) is a more complicated case — it seems to be a tool which you theorize and thus cannot be commissioned to anyone, since it is the product of your work, such as the hypothesis you research in the paper/larger body of research.

**this is not a question and it reads more like a rebuttal to an argument which does not exist**

**my rework: what do you want? a tool that can be used or an image that shows a point?**

5. Who benefits? Is there indeterminacy in the consent field, the way you describe it, or does it bear an infrastructural quality? This might be an interesting pathway into the game design, since it would present a game as a framework for negotiating shared meanings. [...] Relatedly, “who

benefits” is frequently a theme I get back to when I discuss the politics of gender with other queer folk.

**everyone**

**my rework: what the ? i don't understand this – can you ask the same thing in a different way – without theoretical references?<sup>11</sup> esp. ones i have not read?**

**there is no 'consent field'. do you mean – in consent practice, is there something that is not clearly known or is there a lack of clarity in consent practice (yes) or in consent practice is there a basic structural understanding (yes and no) – is there a shared/universal understanding of consent? (no- not really- on the one hand- see your first question- what is consent? maybe a basic understanding is giving permission 'yes/no/maybe/i don't know' but that idea that each person has the same route and access to giving permission is not shared or universal experience. what are the interests of the parties navigating consent? i have no fucking idea, as it depends on the question being asked right?**

**maybe send me these two articles if you want me to think with you on what you are trying to ask**

**in general i want a tool that operates outside of academic/academia for instance a 5 year old or a grandmother could use it**

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<sup>11</sup> The theoretical references here have been omitted but the names mentioned were Dr. Marina Vishmidt, and Zandi Sherman. No specific texts were mentioned.

## Relationship Ethics Ethics of Relation

Recently the term relationships ethics crossed my path, and I am thinking about the ethics of relation or what is implied with that as it relates to consent power and performance.

How does one conceptualize, practice, perform and embody ethics. And does this need to be implicitly or explicitly expressed when working on consent.

Is there a baseline set of agreements? How are those communicated? Does there need to be a shared understanding of those agreements? Is agreements the right word? (actually it isn't)

I spoke with a dear philosopher friend of mine who also happens to be a maker/performer, writer and trans\*activist. She/they focus on ethics in their/her work.

I asked so what is relationship ethics in plain english? Maybe now you are asking the same question. Not just what is it, but what does it look and feel like?

The baseline is that there is a certain code, compass, or set of parameters that is part of any relationship. This is dependent on the type of relation and if there are any hierarchies present.

Sometimes it means I have to show up when i don't want to — that may feel like a compromise.

It can often be part of relations set you up, that your intentions and emotions might not align — and that is ok, but the ethics part is how you accommodate for that. In one sense it is about equanimity equity, sort of. Or a way to work within the obligations that are part of the relationship that honor and support the relationship. This comes with responsibility that also has to do with proximity, and even propinquity if we take it a step further. Is there more or less responsibility, or more ethics of relation if you are in a close intimate sustainable relationship with someone/s or if you barely know them.

The nature of the relationship dictates the actions.

What I am trying to say here is that arriving at consent in our performance practice (and other areas of life) should not be a power play, or salesmanship, seduction, coercion, or simply transactional. Instead, arriving at consent can be a process through which we can begin to clear our assumptions, our participation in racism and other harms, and learn more about ourselves and the other person so we can truly co-create.

Minor relationship contracts, low stakes conversations, collectivity, the given/chosen family web, subtle connections have value and lead to the creation of culture. As well as a sense of belonging and acknowledgment of seeing each other. This is an ethical practice of relation.

Collectivity leads to empathy, awareness and shared experience, but also differentiation, discernment, and appreciation of differences. This leads to feeling/sensing together. Which in turn is why - an ethics that is built into how you relate (whether it's spoken about or not) is the basis for creating a culture of consent.

The more and more I relate, the more I start to understand agreements as one part of a relation. What I would prefer, and like to be able to articulate both intellectually (verbally) and somatically is the negotiation of involved in navigating consent.

Because agreements don't work if the foundation is not a shared understanding...

Part of that is via codes, some of that is culture, some of that is around language... but either way you (me and you) need to build a set of rules baseline way of communicating or exchanging ideas so that we can think/feel through

things. Via that we/ you and I can develop a language in a variety of registers.<sup>12</sup>

So.. instead of codification, or rather before we get to codification or can there be a pivot or a multi channel/nodal approach to codification/code switching/social codes/code of conduct, can the aim be a shared understanding of basic principles

So instead of  $2+2 = \dots$

Is math a more highly valued universal language than, dance, than music, than touch

Why?

Consider an/our experience as an example of relationship ethics:

Imaging a certain relationship with time. Now assume that everyone has the same relationship with time.

Time: as we know it, shares some properties/traits/aspects with Class, Gender, Race, Sexuality, in that they are social constructs.

People have specific relationships with time, and depending on the context that relationship might change.

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<sup>12</sup> *Register*. The different levels at which information lives in the body. Referencing language used in vocal technique eg: registers are head voice, chest voice, etc. Used here to mean how and where and to what depth things are felt in the body. It could be the case that for richness of understanding (especially when complex), cross-register work is important.

It is also the case, that time is relative, or the way a person (you or me) experience time has to do with perspective and positionality, but also culture.

These days the variety of nomenclature around time has become more specific/creative/diverse\_\_\_\_\_. Colonial time/ clock time/ island time/ CP time/queer time/krip time/military time/ time flies when you're having fun.

These names for types or experiences of time/feeling time not only bolster the delineation of time but also names that time is in relationship... is relational

One way of experiencing time may be preferred over the other... it stands to reason that there would be a hierarchy. Or there might be a way of see/feeling time (experiencing) that the majority is experiencing and that would make that, one way-dominant.

Depending on one's relationship to homogeneity and dominant culture, one (you or i) could place more value on the majority and not leave much room for individuation.

Not leaving much room for individuation is the opposite of diversity [and inclusion]

Now, take the above text with 'time' and insert 'Race'

What does that do?

What is the perceived/lived/projected experience of the following concepts in one framing of consent

Give  
Receive  
Take  
Allow

Can you look at these terms while understanding how race and power start to skew the experience of these? We cannot and do not relate to these terms the same way. When experiencing systemic oppression, institutional violence and various types of discrimination, on top of having a racialized body the accuracy and neutrality of these terms start to shift. Part of the ethics of relation is to understand and acknowledge this and then re-negotiate.

## Feelings

### but what about 'feelings'<sup>13</sup>

Part of the navigation of consent is understanding feeling.

When i envisioned a basic somatic exercise that would demonstrate the consideration of consent, i wanted to this exercise to highlight what it *feels like* to negotiate consent. How do we feel (sense) together? What is feeling? In american english we say that "feelings come up." Emotion has a way of emerging or arising into our consciousness, sometimes it seems to overtake us. There is an ele-

<sup>13</sup> *Feeling*. In english this word that has several nested meanings in somatic, emotional, and energetic fronts; and more. How do you think about it? How does the word feeling translate in your mother tongue, or any other language that you know this is not english.

mental quality to feeling: It can flame up like fire or wash over us like water. Feelings can be the impetus for art-work, can be obstacles to collaboration, can be gateways to learning or healing.

Talking about feeling is important in creating work, because it has direct repercussions on how you see your work. You need to process your feelings to process your work.

What is the difference between feelings and making work.

Talking about feelings is a direct counterpoint and remedy in working against white supremacy. Also, patriarchy.

How do you make friends with (your) feelings

The notion that feelings translate to more than one thing and can be perceived as more than one thing is an asset. Why is it important to talk about feelings in performance, in a creative process? In an educational context?

Perhaps:

There can be dangerous aspects of feelings in a collaboration, aka ppl get triggered and then this has to be dealt with. To work well in ensemble people may need help finding resources for processing their emotions outside of or in addition to their creative practice.

Then there's the problem of dumping or re-enacting neurosis in front of an audience (bad consent experience from audience point of view.)

Feelings are a call to action, how do we determine the best action? This seems relevant to educational context, rehearsal context.

How do we cultivate emotional intelligence? When do we cultivate it?

Emotions are complex, and even more so, how do we start to talk about feelings?

### Correspon/dance excerpt 3

This is an excerpt/paraphrase/fictionalized account of an email/skype/correspondence I received from a translator I asked to work with me on translating text from English into German. The text of their email is in **bold** while the ~~critical-emotional~~ edited/fictional translation is in courier new (original english text in Calibri). I include this semi-fictional correspondence for the same reasons I included the others.

The outcome of this exchange is that this text was published in both English and German with my approval. It varies slightly from what the editors suggested and was re-translated to suit my voice more.

The german translation of the word 'feelings' is translated here as 'perception,' which I appreciate because percep-

tions includes multiple sensory inputs, something that is also true of consent.

**Hey babe,**

**Find the edited translation attached.**

**Just for understanding, the short description is the same as the first part of the long description, right?**

**I have a few open questions (translating "allyship", meaning of „feeling“, meaning of „accessible“), lmk when you have 5' to talk that through.**

\*\*\*

Lang DE

In diesem Laborworkshop erarbeiten wir uns ein Verständnis von allyship, indem wir darüber sprechen und eine Reihe von somatischen Übungen durchführen. In unserer gemeinsamen Zeit beabsichtigen wir in erster Linie, einen Raum zu erschaffen, in dem Vertrauen, Intimität und klare Kommunikation stattfinden können, um verkörperte allyship praktizieren zu können. Durch Bewegungsforschung werden wir verkörperte allyship praktizieren und in und auf den Körper als Quelle der Wissensproduktion schauen. Im Verlauf von 90 Minuten werden wir uns bewegen und dabei den Körper als primäres Denk- und Wahrnehmungsorgan nutzen. Wir beginnen autonom, bewe-

gen uns dann in Duos, Trios oder kleinen Gruppen und enden mit einer gemeinsamen Untersuchung.

Wir werden mit Einfühlungs- und Differenzierungsvermögen arbeiten. Dadurch schaffen wir nicht nur eine Grundlage, sondern auch einen Einstieg in unser autonomes und kollektives Verständnis von Intersektionalität als Voraussetzung für das Ausüben von allyship. Dabei verfolgen wir das Ziel, uns mit Konsens, vibe, Empathie sowie den Auswirkungen, die durch unsere Annahmen entstehen, zu befassen. Außerdem wollen wir erörtern, wie wir unser Bewusstsein für Kulturen weißer Vorherrschaft sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb von Institutionen schärfen- und Maßnahmen dagegen ergreifen können. Wir werden einen pluralistischen Ansatz verfolgen, der einfach zugänglich ist und verschiedene Weisen ermöglicht, sich einzubringen. An diesem Laborworkshop nehmen wir so teil, wie wir sind und wertschätzen, was wir bereits haben, und tun dies in dem Wissen, dass wir aktiv einen nicht-normativen somatischen Forschungsraum aufrechterhalten. Die Grundlage dieser Untersuchung erfordert, dass wir zu verstehen beginnen, dass wir uns ohne die Aktivierung des Intellekts Wissen aneignen können.

## Long Description English

In this laboratory, we will work to understand and excavate around allyship through discourse and a series of somatic exercises. The primary intention of our time together is to foster a space where trust, intimacy and clear communication can happen in order to practice embodied allyship. Through movement research, we will practice embodied allyship, and look in and towards the body as a source of knowledge production. Over the course of 90 minutes, we will move, using the body as the primary thinking and feeling organ. Starting with autonomous practice, and then moving in duets, trios or small groups and ending with a collective investigation.

We will work with empathy and differentiation not only as a foundation but also as an entry-point to our autonomous and collective understanding of intersectionality as a foundation for practicing allyship. Our aim is to move through consent, vibe, empathy, the impact of making assumptions, and how to raise awareness and take action in relation to white supremacist cultures both inside and outside of institutions. We will have a pluralistic approach that is accessible and allows for different types of engagement. In this laboratory, we enter as we are, valuing what we already have, knowing that we actively up-hold a non-normative somatic research space. The basis for this research is to start with the understanding that we can assimilate knowledge without activating the intellect.

## Call to Action

What are the collective and individual implications of this text?

The performing arts field and the world is changing, we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. The impact of "Me Too" on cinema and the new field of intimacy coordination are examples of this. We live in a globally connected world where there are more opportunities to co-create with people who have very different lived experiences. Harm of racism still needs to be fully addressed. Young artists coming up today have the chance to shape the future of practice and do away with formerly accepted norms that have limited the potential of so many people. New stories are out there to be told and it is our collective responsibility to support and create space for the telling of these stories.

### **Some tips:**

**Encourage apophenia.**

**Open up different perceptual nodes/modus.**

**Question the (current) hierarchy of the senses.**

**Acknowledge how having a racialized body affects consent.**

**Be less complicit and more accountable.**

**Collaborate.**

Apophenia is the ability to recognize a connection or pattern between seemingly random objects, concepts or ideas. It is often suggested that these patterns give false significance to random data; however, in working on consent all recognized patterns are understood to be valid perceptions.

A perceptual modality that acknowledges that the position of the senses in a hierarchy is dynamic and not fixed. Conventionally, sight is considered the most dominant of these senses in humans, although evolutionarily speaking, previously smell and hearing had dominant positions. Abandoning this hierarchy allows one to engage with reality in a dynamic way that allows room for adaptation.

**No Neutrality.**

The notion that space/body is neutral is a symptom of white supremacy. Space/body is not neutral because it constitutes and is constituted by white privilege.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *ibid*

# “Work-in-progress”: notes on social safety from Amsterdam

*Laura Cull*  
*Ó Maoilearca*

## By way of opening

I was asked by the project leaders of *CHANGE NOW!* to write a short comment on ‘the state of things in Amsterdam’ when it comes to social safety, abuse and discrimination, equity, access, inclusion and the other areas of interest of the project. The invitation was to briefly summarise the situation at the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam and for this comment to then appear with parallel reflections from the other partner institutions in *CHANGE NOW!*. At the same time, this writing will be shared alongside the publication of a synthetic English-language summary of the recent major report of our Polish partners, *The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations. The Experience of Studying and Working at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw* based on the research conducted in 2021-22.

What follows is not a short comment, nor do I consider it by any means a comprehensive summary of the “state of things” at the Academy of Theatre and Dance — a task which feels far too complex to take on here for a range of reasons including the time available, but also because of the nature of that “state of things” and my relation to it. Instead, the writing below is in part an incomplete record of my own learning around social safety — as someone who is still relatively new to the institution, having moved to the ATD in the summer of 2020, and as a non-Dutch immigrant to the Netherlands<sup>1</sup> — as well as

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<sup>1</sup> For example, language remains a barrier to my understanding and access to relevant resources at times, as I am still in the process of learning Dutch — but the work of translating feels like an

a compilation of some notes and observations that should very much be read as having the status of “work-in-progress”. It is a first attempt to write from what I know, from what I am in the midst of learning and from an emerging awareness of what I do not know from my experiences as a white, straight, cis, non-disabled woman in a position of leadership in the academy.

In these reflections it feels important to acknowledge that teaching is no longer a daily or regular part of my work. In the ten years leading up to when I moved to take up my current post at the ATD, teaching was at the core of my job – working primarily with Bachelors students on Theatre and Performance programs in the context of UK universities, alongside doing research and taking up various management positions. But since I started as Lector and Head of DAS Graduate School in 2020, teaching is not my primary task and therefore I recognise that my perspective in relation to questions of social safety will likely vary significantly from those who are teaching on a regular basis. Within my role, I am regularly in conversations that allow me to hear from teachers, students, researchers and other colleagues about their experiences of social safety; I take part in policy discussions about “social safety” and “diversity and inclusion” at multiple levels in the organization; and questions around social justice, accessibility and equity are emerging as central concerns and guiding values both in my own research and the wider research program that we are trying to build within

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important process to enter into in itself to also support non-Dutch speaking students to locate potential areas of solidarity, for instance on anti-racist work.

the Lectorate (or research department) of the Academy which I lead. I am by no means an expert on social safety. But given that the social safety of our school is a matter of collective responsibility and a shared task for students, teachers and staff alike, I welcome this opportunity to reflect on the experiences I have had and to engage in some further research into their context.

What follows here is structured in three parts: the first two parts are more of an attempt to introduce something of the Dutch context for the consideration of social safety in arts academies and a gesture towards the requested summary of institutional activities related to social safety at both the ATD and the AHK. The third part takes the form of two short reflections on the complexities and contradictions that emerge in the space between policies and practices. By way of closing, I then go into a little more depth to narrate what I have learned and am learning about social safety at the ATD from the practice of my friend and colleague, Rajni Shah.

### **I. Concepts of social safety: more or less; safer and braver; safe for whom?**

In the Dutch context, the concept of social safety is often primarily defined by its opposite, with the focus on safety as negated by “undesirable behavior” – including transgressive behaviour, abuse, intimidation, aggression and violence, bullying and discrimination. The stated aim of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) as an organization is to enable students to study and staff to work

“with pleasure and a safe feeling”, stating that: “Our university of the arts must be a safe environment for everyone” (AHK 2023a: 1). According to the nationally produced “Social Safety Framework for Art Education” (2021):

An educational institution is safe when the social, psychological and physical safety of students and staff is not compromised by the actions of others. This means that there is a safe and positive atmosphere within the educational institution. This also means that bullying, discrimination, intimidation, sexual harassment, aggression, violence and other forms of undesirable behaviour are unacceptable and that the institution will take action against them and prevent them as much as possible.

In AHK policy documents, the discourse on social safety is also closely linked to the question of teacher ‘professionalism’, where inappropriate behaviour is also specifically linked to “unprofessional contact with students” (AHK 2023a: 1). This connection is perhaps more present in universities of applied sciences like the AHK than it might be in University contexts, given the high numbers of teachers working at the academy who come into contact with students in their capacity as professionals from the working field of theatre and dance without necessarily having had specific training in pedagogy or what constitutes ‘professionalism’ in the context of higher education institutions.

In Codes of Conduct, Policy and Regulations texts produced by the ATD and AHK, the definition of

social safety is understandably closely linked to the attempt to clarify procedures for complaints and to differentiate roles and responsibilities with regards to how cases are managed and by whom, within the various departments of the institution. In this context, for example, it becomes important to distinguish between complaints about “undesirable behaviour”, from “complaints about education-related matters” and “labour disputes” in order to clarify who to address. Social safety is defined in practice when a decision is taken about whether a report is made to the “Complaints Committee” or the “Examination committee”, for example. Related to this, albeit different, there have also been efforts within the ATD to maintain a distinction between activities related to “Diversity and Inclusion” and those related to “Social Safety” in part to clarify the difference between the functions of different platforms and committees.

In practice though, social safety seems fundamentally inseparable from equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) — not least since it includes discrimination. And indeed, it is precisely what makes social safety cases so complex are the ways in which interpersonal and educational matters become entangled and interconnected with each other in lived experience. This is not to discount the need for these distinct regulations and decision-making bodies – but only to acknowledge that much of the labour and difficulty involved in this area is precisely concerned with whether to name an experience as a matter of “social safety” or not (and/or as something else too), and if so, of what kind. (For example, the current guidance at

the ATD also calls upon receivers of social safety reports to work with the reporter to assess whether a situation is “severe” or “less serious”). This sense of struggle with what social safety actually means and for whom is also linked to the recurrently voiced observation that all kinds of encounters, events and processes in the Academy are now described as feeling “unsafe” in a broader, generalized or more varied way than might be desirable for policy or procedural purposes. (A concern that goes along the lines of the argument: ‘If everything is unsafe then nothing is’).

In recent years, critical discourse around the notion of “safe space” has informed some of the conversations taking place within the ATD, including in relation to the *CHANGE NOW!* project. In this context, students and staff critique the possibility of any universally and completely safe space, and reject any simple binary between safe and unsafe in favour of thinking in terms of *safer* space and engaging with concepts of “brave space”. As student and *CHANGE NOW!* participant Alex Blum suggests in a recent interview, “I think it’s more a question of more or less safe, I wouldn’t be able to answer it like “either/or”, “safe” or “unsafe” (Blum in AHK 2023b). When asked about what social safety actually means to them in practice, Alex goes on to refer to when teachers respect their pronouns, to feeling “seen” by their teachers, to having their questions listened to and to having their failures embraced as part of learning.

Acknowledgment of difference and structural inequalities as the context for specific efforts to create safer learning environments is fundamental. In many

cases, students bring with them high degrees of knowledge and understanding – both discursive and practical – about the complexities of the relationships between safety and discomfort for different groups in the context of systemic structures such as white supremacy, ableism, and cisnormativity<sup>2</sup>. Again, to quote Alex Blum: “Sometimes the privilege of feeling safe or the privilege of feeling comfort comes at the expense of other bodies” (Blum in AHK 2023). As my fellow Lector Aminata Cairo points out, addressing questions of social safety is often not cosy, comfortable or “gezellig” (a word that is identified by some as a quintessential feature of Dutch culture<sup>3</sup>). On the contrary, it involves the acknowledgment that what may make a situation feel safe for some is precisely what makes it feel unsafe for others. This more nuanced perspective is important for our institutions policy makers and writers to take into account – for instance, when the AHK Student Affairs refers to students’ entitlement to “study in a pleasant atmosphere”. Whilst clearly mutual respect can be insisted upon, the challenges of collective learning across difference can by no means be expected to be perpetually “comfortable” or “gezellig”. As Joy Mariama Smith puts it in their text for the *CHANGE NOW!* publication:

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2 In the context of post-experience Masters programs like the ones we have at DAS Graduate School, it is highly likely that a teacher can find themselves in a room with students who are themselves already experienced professionals in the field of facilitating safer and more inclusive spaces — in a way that demands co-learning approaches that encourage students to bring their own expertise into the room.

3 See for example <https://www.dutchamsterdam.nl/155-gezellig>

Some people don't like the word 'racism' — those people are usually white people.

Or maybe people who are not or do not self identify as people of color or not white...

Why? — Because it often evokes shame, embarrassment, guilt and more.

Shame and guilt, coincidentally often prohibit accountability.

shame/guilt/embarrassment are not comfortable feelings. Nor should they be, and the belief or supposition that ~~everyone needs to be comfortable~~ white people need to be comfortable is harmful. Oppression, discrimination, phobia, alienation, isolation, vilification are also places of discomfort... and yet and yet...

(Smith 2023)

Whilst I am conscious of the sensitivities of proposing that we can 'learn from the US' in the Dutch context, there is extensive US-based knowledge on safe space working and how to build equitable access in education that might be usefully translated to the situation at the ATD, albeit with the need to attend to differences. In US education, EDI and social justice contexts, 'safe spaces' are broadly defined as those that are primarily focussed on providing non-judgmental support. As Diana Ali discusses, although there are now many uses of the term, the notion of safe space originated in movement-building and educational contexts to describe the aim to increase 'the

safety and visibility of marginalized or oppressed community members.' Popularized by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013), the distinct notion of 'brave spaces' then emerged to denote environments where the aim is to safely facilitate challenging dialogue in ways that can be difficult and uncomfortable (Ali 2017). Brave space is defined by features such as "controversy with civility"; "owning intentions and impacts" and a clarity of contract among participants not to intentionally inflict harm on one another (Arao and Clemens 2013).

As Ali notes, the notion of safe space has been subject to attack in some quarters of US education as a supposed challenge to freedom of speech and for enabling students to retreat from perspectives that differ from their own (alongside and related to controversies regarding 'no-platforming' and the debate surrounding the relation between hate speech and freedom of expression which has also been very prominent in the UK). On the other hand, the value of safe spaces in higher education has been defended by others who argue that 'students don't fully embrace uncomfortable learning unless they are themselves comfortable' (Schapiro in Ali 2017: 3). But as Ali points out, the conversation around safe space working often confuses at least two different kinds or qualities of safe space: those 'allowing marginalized individuals opportunities to retreat from the very real threats and demands they face by their very existence' (including in a context where a safe space gathering must take place at an undisclosed location) and 'the kind of space to allow students to process new and uncomfortable ideas pro-

ductively' (3). In this context, naming the classroom as aiming to be a 'brave space' rather than a safe space is an important distinction for Ali in enabling participants to know what to expect and how to prepare for the kinds of conversations that might take place. But it also raises the question of how brave space can be made safer for marginalized students or how to provide equitable access to brave space. This is precisely the issue that Bojana Mladenović seems to be touching on when she articulates the double aims of the anti-racist and decolonial work within the SNDO program: 'to make the school safer and less violent for *students of color* and a space of transformative (read: less violence inducing) learning for the *white* population of students, teachers and staff' (Mladenović, emphasis added). As Mladenović acknowledges, the challenge from an intersectional perspective is also then to ask how this approach can expand to be attentive to other forms of structural oppression such as ableism and neurotypicality (building on the work that SNDO already does in relation to queer, trans\* and nonbinary inclusivity).

## II. Social safety at the ATD, AHK and the Netherlands

Social safety has been a focal point of discussion throughout the Academy since I began working there three years ago, and continues to be a recurring source of concern in relation to art academies and the wider arts and creative sector in the Netherlands (including when high-profile cases of inappropriate behaviour and abuse

reach the attention of the media). In recent years, these include: the criminal investigation into sexual abuse allegations around the TV talent show, 'The Voice of Holland' (since January 2022)<sup>4</sup>; an article naming the conditions of Dutch art academies as producing unsafe working environments (December 2020)<sup>5</sup>; an advisory statement about transgressive behaviour in the cultural and creative sector including vocational art education issued by the Raad voor Cultuur (Council for Culture) (June 2022)<sup>6</sup>; and a controversial recent report based on research investigating transgressive behavior in the field of Dutch dance entitled *Shadowdancing* (2023)<sup>7</sup>. In March 2023, there was also controversy when the entire board of *Mores*, the reporting centre for undesirable behaviour in the Dutch cultural and creative sector, resigned due to questions about their credibility and independence<sup>8</sup>.

I am not in a position to provide a comprehensive summary of all the different activities and processes that the Academy has been involved in related to social safety in recent years. There has been a huge amount of work in this area at different levels in the institution and nationally: at the level of individual departments within

4 See also a recent article on this case in the UK media <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/14/two-stars-of-the-voice-of-holland-charged-with-sex-offences>

5 See [https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/43321\\_it\\_s\\_not\\_your\\_fault\\_how\\_art\\_academies\\_perpetuate\\_social\\_unsafety](https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/43321_it_s_not_your_fault_how_art_academies_perpetuate_social_unsafety)

6 See the English-language summary available at: <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/adviezen/2022/06/21/summary-advisory-report-on-transgressive-behaviour>

7 The methodology and independence of the research underlying this report has been criticised within the Academy of Theatre and Dance and in other arts universities. See [https://www.verinorm.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Schaduwtdansen\\_23-05.pdf](https://www.verinorm.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Schaduwtdansen_23-05.pdf)

8 *Mores* was established in 2018 in the Netherlands in response to the #MeToo movement. More information about the context for the recent board resignation can be found in various press articles such as this: <https://nos.nl/collectie/13887/artikel/2468418-bestuur-meldpunt-ongewenst-gedrag-mores-stapt-op>

the ATD; at Academy-level; at the level of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) to which the ATD belongs and at a national level where government bodies are also conducting research related to social safety in higher art education and nationwide consortia of art schools take joint sector initiatives. For example, in May 2021, the Executive Boards of thirteen universities of the arts — including the AHK — issued a statement in order to signal their commitment to social safety as a ‘a crucial issue’ for the sector and to announce both joint work on a Social Safety Code and a collaborative venture to establish a national ‘Ombud’s office’ in the area of social safety in art education. Social safety was explicitly named as a theme in the *Sector Agenda for Dutch higher art education (2021-2025)*<sup>9</sup> and more recently, in May 2023, the Education Inspectorate of the Dutch government published a new study focusing on social safety in higher art and fashion education, titled: ‘Managing lasting social safety in higher art and fashion education — Enter (for) the conversation’. According to the government, the reason for this investigation was signals received by the Ministry of Education received in Spring 2021 “about an unsafe learning environment at art and fashion courses at various universities of applied sciences”. This 2023 report then aimed to inventory the policy and processes that had since been pursued by university boards in order to provide a structurally safe learning environment for students in their schools.

9 See the English version of the agenda here: [https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/system/knowledge\\_base/attachments/files/000/001/274/original/Engelse\\_KUO\\_v1\\_15\\_11-21.pdf?1639663252](https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/system/knowledge_base/attachments/files/000/001/274/original/Engelse_KUO_v1_15_11-21.pdf?1639663252)

At the level of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK), which includes the ATD, the recent growth of social safety related activities and measures include: the appointment of a team of seven internal and external AHK Confidential Advisors (“*vertrouwenspersonen*”) — broadly equivalent to the role of the ombudsperson in other organisations such as the University of Amsterdam — whom staff and students can approach as the first port of call for social safety incidents (also in June 2022)<sup>10</sup>; and an updating of the legislation, regulations and Code of Conduct for Social Safety by the AHK (February 2023)<sup>11</sup>. In November 2021, an institution-wide staff survey was also carried out which included questions about social safety and undesirable behaviour. In the social safety category, employees were asked to score their level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as: “*I dare to be myself at work*”; “*I dare to stand up for myself at work*”; and “*I feel safe to give feedback to colleagues*”. In terms of undesirable behaviour, staff were asked to register if they had experienced various kinds of behaviour in the organization including: gossip, discrimination, unwanted sexual attention, verbal aggression, threat or harassment, physical aggression or physical violence, and bullying. They were also asked to rank how well organised the aftercare was of incidents of undesirable behaviour. Whilst (as far as I am aware) the results were not published in the public domain, the findings of the survey were shared internally with departments pro-

10 See <https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/about-the-university/social-safety/ombudsperson/ombudsperson.html>

11 See <https://www.ahk.nl/en/facilities/student-affairs/social-safety/>

viding a comparison with an average for the whole Academy and a national benchmark for vocational education. In April 2023, the Executive Board of the AHK then launched a new “Social Safety Survey” to be conducted among all students and staff by an external agency. The research and consultancy agency Verinorm (who also conducted the *Shadowdancing* report) was asked to conduct a study into social safety and experiences of transgressive behavior among employees, students and alumni of the AHK. The stated aim is ‘to monitor the current social climate’ across the six academies that make up the AHK and for the external agency to use the findings to make recommendations for improvements. “How do we foster a culture in which everyone feels safe enough to speak out and in which we dare to call each other to account?”<sup>12</sup>.

Within the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD), a process had already begun in March 2021 initiated by the then director with the stated intention to ‘improve social safety at the ATD’ following reports of multiple social safety incidents within the school, outside the building and on social media. During Spring and Summer 2021, a series of ‘away days’ and workshops were held for Heads of Department facilitated by an external organization, *De Federatie*, seeking to give space to articulate the painful experiences of the past; to encourage cross-departmental dialogue on social safety; and to arrive at a common framework that would leave enough scope for different departments to nuance the emphasis in the ways necessary

<sup>12</sup> This is the question posed in the formal internal announcement about the latest AHK Social Safety survey, entitled: *Are You OK? Invitation for the social safety survey* (2023).

for their specific communities of students and teachers. Within the DAS Graduate School, the six main priorities that emerged through follow-up conversations among the leaders of the Masters programs were: i) the issue of racism, experiences of racism both inside and outside the school and how to make clear that discrimination is not accepted within the institution; ii) gender inclusion and the role of inclusive language in social safety; iii) the possibility of aiming to create ‘brave spaces’ which foreground learning (and acknowledge that discomfort may be part of that process), as well as supportive, safe spaces; iv) the role of class and financial background in experiences of exclusion; v) decolonizing the curriculum and vi) the need for an expanded understanding of accessibility to include neurodiversity. Staff were then tasked to come up with a written articulation of emerging values that could be shared with the wider organization as the basis for future dialogues. Following Anthony Heidweiller’s appointment as Director, the Academy has since published a school-wide manual “Social safety — What to do in case of undesirable behaviour for employees and managers” (June 2022); and conducted an inventory of how social safety is assured within the Bachelors and Masters study programs (in April 2022) and support departments of the ATD (in Dec 2022)<sup>13</sup>; as well as holding further facilitated sessions for staff to share knowledge and attitudes to social safety across departments.

<sup>13</sup> At the request of the then ATD Director Anthony Heidweiller, two internal inventories were made of social safety assurance in 2022 by my colleagues Gwenoële Trapman and Marijke Schaap. The inventories were made following interviews conducted first with the artistic director/training coordinators of the Bachelors and Masters programs; and then with the heads of the support departments such as Production, Technical and Education Support.

Given the history of the organization, one of the notable features of both the ATD and the AHK is internal difference. The ATD, for example, is made up of multiple different departments (“schools” and programs) that have, over the years, developed their own values and ways of working, including their own approaches to social safety. The question of to what extent central Academy-level policy and practice is needed and in what areas is an ongoing matter of discussion. For the purposes of this writing, this situation of internal difference means it is difficult to generalize about social safety practice at the Academy. For example, the inventory mentioned above concluded that “there is a big difference in the extent to which attention is paid to social safety in the various study programmes”. The inventory also usefully documented the varying approaches the programs have to student guidance, mentoring and feedback methods; it reports that “one program uses an intimacy coordinator”; while others offer students ongoing Consent workshops, Deep Democracy trainings, Gender Diversity Awareness training and Campfire Talks; and some programs have specific timetabled moments in their curriculum in which students can indicate whether there have been any incidents relating to social safety.

My observation would be that, over these three years and until the more recent events I described at the start, the focus at the ATD has been primarily on social safety as it occurs in the relationships between students and teachers. Less attention has been paid to social safety as a matter of concern for staff in their relationships to

each other, their managers and to the senior management of the institution as a whole. Given the sheer quantity of new and historic cases emerging from students and calling for the attention of managers, this focus is understandable. Social safety cases involve a lot of emotional labour to varying degrees for all parties involved and new structures of care were and are still needed to provide staff and students with the support they need to work through a process which can otherwise be isolating and exhausting. I recall in a recent session on social safety for staff, one of the external consultants remarked that having a large amount of reports or cases was a “good sign” for an organization. Whilst our tendency is generally to frame the emergence of a case as a “problem”, he reminded us that the very act of reporting is an indication of a degree of safety in itself; a healthy organization, he suggested, is one in which people feel able to report when they experience undesirable behaviour. Of course, he was not saying that we want more cases; but that we certainly do want to know and hear about inappropriate behaviour when it is going on. Painfully, at the same time, recent years have also shown how harms have taken place in the Academy where the reporting system has either not been used or has not worked effectively to enable acknowledgment and healing.

### III. Two reflections

*Do as I say, not as I do:*

#### **social safety + performative contradiction**

Without wishing to undermine the value of policy documents and written procedures – which necessarily have their place in creating social safety in institutional contexts – they also tell us very little about how to actually practice it in our day-to-day interactions and relationships. What does it actually mean in our bodies to create a safer and more inclusive classroom; what does it actually feel like in the moment to moment to facilitate welcoming and belonging for every body in a space? Whilst Academy policy documents and codes of conduct include broad definitions of what counts as “inappropriate behaviour” or “social safety”, the real complexity of the work emerges as we try to relate these concepts and regulations to the messy complexities of lived experience where it can sometimes be incredibly difficult for receivers, doers and witnesses of harm to articulate and name differing accounts of ‘what happened’. A further consequence of this gap between written policy and practice is that it enables the frequent enactment of performative contradictions. It is all too easy to find ourselves in the position where we are ‘talking the talk’ of safety or accessibility but doing so in ways that are themselves unsafe or inaccessible. According to a ‘both/and’, rather than either/or logic, experience also shows that it is perfectly possible for the most vocal social safety advocate to also be a perpetrator of bullying.

It is perfectly possible to find yourself in a room where some people are talking about social safety in ways that feel profoundly unsafe for others. And this phenomenon — which can manifest as white saviourism, for example — also recurs where certain forms of diversity and inclusion leadership tip over into an authoritarian mode, including in relation to those who are sometimes conceived as the supposed ‘beneficiaries’ of the inclusive gesture.

I remember... at a former theatre school I worked in, there was a colleague who had taken it upon herself to ensure that all staff had participated in Mental Health training. The idea was that the training would teach us how to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. At the time the training was being held, I was experiencing a period of acute anxiety and depression triggered by an intense period of organizational restructuring at the university. (Experiences of anxiety and depression have been part of my life since my early 20s). I tried to attend the training session but found it too difficult to participate due to my own mental health at the time. After I excused myself and left the workshop, the colleague cornered me in a public corridor to ask when I would be able to complete the training because it was compulsory.

I have found myself in the situation of performative contradiction or facing inconsistencies of saying and doing more times than I can count – in different roles, with varying degrees of responsibility, including in the

context of the *CHANGE NOW!* project itself. (Indeed, I am doubtless performing contradictions in *this* text itself — in the unwitting slippages between what I mean to say and what my words might actually do for and with different readers). As many of us have learned and continue to learn the hard way, a spoken commitment to principles of social safety, equity and accessibility is no actual guarantee of us having the necessary knowledge of how to practice those values in a specific context. For example, despite the good intentions of *CHANGE NOW!* to foster solidarity between European theatre schools on their transformation into safer and more inclusive learning environments, we know that the project itself also involved the production of events that were experienced as unsafe and harmful by participants.

### “We are learning” (at whose expense?)

In conversations around social safety at the ATD, and indeed in the context of the *CHANGE NOW!* project, I have often heard reference to the importance of feeling safe to make mistakes. And rightly so. Mistakes are widely acknowledged in pedagogical contexts as the basis for growth and learning. In the context of the ATD, I hear reference to mistakes as part of a narrative of recognising the gap between ambitions and reality with regard to the capacity to hold space for a safe and inclusive learning environment; teachers and institutional managers like myself will refer to the need to embrace making mistakes as part of a learning process. “*We are trying, we are learning*”.

And, of course, this makes sense at some level; but at the same time, this acknowledgment of not-knowing (or even of incompetence) when it comes to social safety or EDI, can also be used as a way to avoid being judged or taking responsibility for the harm that our mistakes can cause. We need to keep asking ourselves: who is learning from whom and under what conditions? How to avoid situations in which racialized students and staff are exhausted by supporting the anti-racist education of the white-bodied community; or where the burden of anti-ableist education is repeatedly placed on disabled colleagues? In research done in the US education context for example, ‘Students of color express that they are placed in positions where they have to combat systemic racism while simultaneously working to educate their peers—a situation that ultimately has an impact on their own socioemotional well-being (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000)’ (Ali 2017: 7).

This is something I find I need to constantly attend to in my own behaviour: noticing the difference between moments when it is and is not appropriate to reach out to friends and colleagues with differing lived experience for advice; noticing the reciprocity of advice giving and taking; noticing when asking for someone’s expertise needs to take the form of paid consultation; noticing when I am putting others in the position of educating me when I need to educate myself; noticing the difference between asking for feedback and seeking approval.

In the context of contemporary arts education this question of who is learning from whom is particularly complex – where, as educators, we need to engage in potentially uncomfortable reflection on to what extent it is appropriate to ask students to accept us as we are in a given stage of a learning process in relation to social safety and inclusion (and when we need to accelerate this process or move it outside the classroom through actively engaging in additional training, for example). On the one hand, this is complex because there is the simultaneous movement in many contexts towards a more flattened and reciprocal pedagogical model where it is no longer a matter of “the teacher teaching the student” (unilaterally), but of the teacher facilitating a space of *co-learning*, in which they themselves are acknowledged as being in a process of learning (albeit still within a power dynamic where it remains essential to acknowledge differences and inequalities between teachers and students due to payment, assessment and so on). Nevertheless, the reason for embracing this reciprocal model is ultimately that it benefits students’ education (for instance, through leading by example on a politics of knowledge beyond mastery and authority) and therefore is incompatible with practice that (however unwittingly) protects educators from taking responsibility for harming students on the grounds of facilitating their own learning. Students teach us; but they are not *there* to teach us. It feels like there is a subtle but important difference here in terms of a sense of entitlement and expectation. In its most damaging form,

“*We are learning*” can be a form of supremacy where the lives and needs particularly of queer, trans\*, disabled, neurodiverse and students of colour are devalued at the expense of those of their teachers (albeit that they themselves may be from one or more oppressed identities). But, of course, the reverse is also true. Students can do harm as well as receive it, both in relation to each other and in relation to teachers and other staff in educational institutions. Just as students who experience harm through structural exclusions and discrimination are not immune from harming others.

adrienne maree brown’s book *We Will Not Cancel Us* (2020) deals carefully with these issues: giving us the important invitation to ‘practice accountability without punishment’ (brown 2020: 10). brown encourages communities and institutions to ask the right questions about how to enable transformation in a context where we do not want to ‘protect those who cause harm’ but nor do we want to foster a punitive cancel culture (ibid., 6). In the *CHANGE NOW!* publication, my colleague Bojana Mladenović also touches on these challenges, announcing her preference for a culture of ‘calling in’ rather than ‘calling out’ – where harmful mistakes must be acknowledged and accountability is sought, but is not used as the basis for exclusion. At its heart is the fundamental acknowledgment that the majority of us will *both* receive and do harm and that we need to pay closer attention to how harm and healing can happen for all (ibid.,7).

## By way of closing:

### Practicing difference as a value; thinking alongside Rajni Shah

Above and beyond the social safety policy-oriented work and staff development activities that I have already described, there is some extraordinary research and practice taking place at the Academy that really brings me hope for the future and that I consider to be examples of best practice in terms of building more inclusive classrooms and working together towards a more socially just world in the arts and society. One way that transformation can and does take place at the ATD is through the empowered presence of queer, trans\*, non-binary, Black and Global Majority, neurodiverse and disabled artists, students, teachers and researchers leading projects in the school and shaping the agenda for the future. It was great that we could share many of these projects with *CHANGE NOW!* — both through the core sessions and the publication including: the work of Rajni Shah; the *Access Intimacy* project by Carly Everaert and Mira Thompson; *shy\*play* by aster arribas and antje nestel; *IPOP* by Elia Steffen and Szymon Adamczak; the work of Joy Mariama Smith and Bojana Mladenović in SNDO, as well as the work of Edit Kaldor who facilitated the student program of the Amsterdam session. From my personal perspective, it is through these projects and the people who lead them that I have learned the most in recent years about what it really means to practice and embody difference as a value in

arts education. Or again, I am grateful to these projects and people for continuously showing me *how much I do not know* and how — as a white person, as a straight cis, non-disabled, middle class woman occupying a position of power and responsibility in the institution — I need to be in a constant process of attending to my own assumptions and practicing listening more attentively to the differing lived perspectives of others, noting my own habits of falling into false universalisms and exclusive norms. These are people and practices that are helping me to get more skilled in feeling how and when racism, ableism, trans\*phobia or other oppressive mechanisms are at work in the spaces I inhabit; to take responsibility for naming that and working with others to address it. At the same time, as I've written elsewhere, following thinkers like Vinciane Despret: 'It is not simply that there are many points of view *on* the world. It is that a point of view *is* a world. Is a worlding. Alongside and in relation to others'<sup>14</sup> (Cull Ó Maoilearca 2023). So, as well as practicing how to dismantle the worlds we do not want, it is also about exploring where worlds overlap and how to build new anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-ableist, neurodiverse, queer and interspecies worldings together.

I would love to go into more detailed discussion about all of this great work, but that will have to wait for another moment. For now, I would like to close by sharing a few brief thoughts in response to the work of my friend and colleague, Rajni Shah. I have learned more, and more

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<sup>14</sup> This is part of a text used for the voice-over of a recent short film made by the ATD Lectorate, which you can watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNJXDMbhX9w&t=1s>

deeply than I can say from Rajni — who works at the ATD as a researcher and as a tutor on the [THIRD program](#) within DAS Graduate School. Their practice includes hosting listening gatherings, including ‘Listening Tables’, facilitating a ‘[Feminist Killjoys Reading Group](#)’, giving talks and publishing [podcasts](#) and writing including the recent book [Experiments in Listening](#) (2021) which was published with a series of print-at-home zines. It is difficult to summarise the great many lessons that Rajni’s work has offered to me personally, to our school and to the themes of the *CHANGE NOW!* project<sup>15</sup>. Some of these lessons have felt and still feel good, some of them have felt and still feel difficult and uncomfortable, but they all feel urgent and there are a few that stand out as particularly important to mention here.

In the first instance, it relates to Rajni’s practice of drawing attention to the form and conditions of interpersonal encounters; to the ‘structures of dialogue and interaction’ (Shah 2023) that shape the nature of what emerges in and as relationality; to all that is already in the room before anyone has said a word. In their focus on ‘listening and gathering as creative and political acts’: Rajni emphasises the ways in which *how* we gather (for instance, in public conversations) produces the ‘content’ of the gathering or what kind of gathering is possible and for whom, contra the dominant tendency in academic contexts to assume a false neutrality or egalitarianism of standard formats and containers (like the paper followed by Q+A). Questions of ‘safety’ and its relationship to listening and

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15 The recording of Rajni Shah and my contribution to the Warsaw session is available online here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe\\_La\\_YCXv4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe_La_YCXv4)

racism are an inherent part of this work — for instance, including in the practice of creating BIPOC-only spaces for listening sessions in an ‘attempt to create a safer space for those who have experienced racialisation’ (Shah 2023). When I opened this section by framing this work (perhaps bluntly) as ‘best practice’ in the Academy, I do not mean this to say that these are practices that have guaranteed social safety or were somehow ‘risk-free’. Rather, I consider them best practice in the sense of being highly attentive to how, why and when the desire to create safety is and is not achieved in specific contexts — as in the case of some of the examples that Rajni discusses in their text for the *CHANGE NOW!* publication. As much as we might want to reach for ‘tools’, ‘methods’ and ‘strategies’ to improve social safety in our schools, it is clear that these are never recipes or blueprints with predictable outcomes.

Rajni’s work has already been and will continue to be very important at the ATD and particularly at DAS Graduate School for helping us to consider the politics of structure in the pedagogical context. For example, in contrast to the emphasis on the need to dismantle master-pupil hierarchies and authoritarian power dynamics in education in the Polish theatre schools context, DAS has already long since considered itself as practicing a horizontal approach to art education where Masters programs are framed as facilitating co-learning among peers — including as signaled by the naming of those who attend the programs as ‘participants’ rather than ‘students’. This horizontality is also understood as embedded in programs through the use of approaches such as the DAS ‘feed-

back method’ which aims to: ‘empower the artist who is getting feedback on his or her work, to go beyond the pronouncement of judgments, to allow fundamental criticism, to create a sense of (self-) discipline for the sake of precision and clarity, and, last but not least, to increase the enjoyment of giving and receiving feedback’ (DAS Theatre website)<sup>16</sup>. However, at the same time, there is also recognition that existing structures and practices cannot be fixed and need to be constantly reviewed and developed with and by the communities working with them, particularly in relation to their capacity to hold space for difference among participants.

In the context of the THIRD program, the presence of Rajni’s practice has also led to increased dialogue within the team about how supposedly ‘open’ educational formats can risk a kind of ‘structurelessness’ that is not in fact equally open for all and can encourage a return for some to certain unnamed, default behaviours. There is a sense of a need to pay greater attention to the experiences of processes and pedagogical structures that are framed as ‘free’ or ‘open’ to difference, as in fact being laden with unspoken and unacknowledged rules, codes, and expectations that can be exclusionary. We observe that dismantling hierarchies of knowledge needs more rather than less structure, and the need for a greater transparency of structure: or what Rajni describes as “clarity of container”. Informed by Rajni’s work, we have also discussed the shifting role of the tutor in peer-to-peer learning contexts

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<sup>16</sup> For more information about the feedback method used in DAS Theatre, see: <https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/theatre-programmes/das-theatre/study-programme/feedback-method-1/>

as one of holding space as safely as possible in a setting where artists may be encountering each other from very different positionalities. This requires the development of skills in managing conflict, misunderstandings, mistakes and critique; being alert to emerging instances of harm or abuse<sup>17</sup>; and at the same time being aware of where the boundaries of the tutor role might end and when situations call for other forms of professional support. Likewise, it is also observed that, while recent tendencies in education in the Dutch context have shifted toward well-intentioned flexibilization and/or have long since placed a value on the empowerment of students to determine and take responsibility for their own learning trajectories, it can be that these practices are not as intrinsically empowering or equally empowering as they aim to be. For different and unequally distributed reasons, students may not have the *capacity* to take on this role in relation to their learning, and it could be that it is more empowering for some to in fact make *fewer* or *different degrees* of choices and decisions with regards to what they learn and how.

There is so much more to say on all of these topics, and so many other voices from our Academy that need to be heard on experiences of safety, much more so than mine. But for now, I want to close by expressing my gratitude to the CHANGE NOW! project leaders in Warsaw for inviting me into the project and for the opportunity to step into this research and reflection which has helped me develop my own learning in important new ways.

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<sup>17</sup> I am taking these different categories of terms from adrienne maree brown’s *We Will Not Cancel Us* (2020: 27-30) and find the distinctions she draws between them helpful.

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# Anti-racism in choreography education

Notes and reflections  
on experimental  
approaches SNDO  
2014–2022

*Bojana  
Mladenović*

The SNDO – School for New Dance Development – offers a full time four-year professional education course leading to a Bachelor’s degree in Art – Choreography at the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam. The school was founded in 1975 as an attempt to find new directions for dance next to the existing forms and styles that dominated the field. After forty years, the SNDO remains inquisitive, open minded, and in the foreground of progressive developments in the fields of dance and performance. In the curriculum, the school establishes the conditions from which the creativity of the student can emerge. Reflection on the specific qualities of dance and performance as art forms is developed, and awareness of the body and the artistic, ethical and political implications of working with it take precedence.

This text is written in the first person, reflecting on seven years of work as the head of SNDO, on approaches, experiments and attempts to make the school safer and less violent for students of color and transformative (read: less violence inducing) and learning for the white population of students, teachers and staff.

To accomplish this, processes of transforming curricula, culture, language, mentality, examining cultural archives and holding the space for confusions, clashes, at times violent acts of discrimination which occurred along the way, accompanied us to their fullest.

The original aim of this self-reflection and reporting was twofold. On the one hand the aim was to bring to visibility the work done. At the Academy of Theatre and Dance, the workload is always relentlessly high.

This rarely provides for breath, which is needed if one is to record, reflect on, document, make visible and disseminate some of the work and findings. When it comes to anti-racist work specifically, as much as the climate is slowly changing, eight years ago, this work was met with distrust. It was allowed but never fully embraced by the higher echelons of ATD. In this context, the gesture of bringing to surface the labor, approaches and effects internally in the organisation is necessary.

The other aim was to use it as a platform to discuss and reflect on, and from here give the shape to the anti-racist work ahead. Ideally and necessarily, this will be done with the whole SNDO and ATD community.

Sharing this text now – in the context of the *Change Now* publication – brings with it an opportunity to connect this work to parallel activity taking place internationally – perhaps particularly with the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris where anti-racist work has also been a focus.

Looking back, two distinct chapters can be identified. The first one is marked by the notion of decoloniality, whereby SNDO understood that its legacy as a progressive contemporary choreography school did not make it exempt from the colonial modernity matrix. This matrix shapes its curriculum and culture, making a safe and recognizable study environment for everyone who is socialized as 'belonging' within that matrix, but not so much for those whom the colonial matrix rendered as other: those who, for a long time, were not only not present at SNDO, but whose very non-presence was itself invisible and unacknowledged.

With time, decoloniality discourse (2014-2018) was slowly unpacked and one might say "received" by the students and teachers. However, the discourse and the reality of whiteness as the predominant cultural archive remained an icky subject, evoking resistance and avoidance within the white student and teacher population. The period from 2019-2021 was marked by bringing this to visibility as an attempt to make whiteness thinkable, speakable and – we hoped – collectively *dismantlable*. In this second period, the artist Joy Mariama Smith joined me as a partner in defining the directions and curating the programs.

### **2014–2018: Decoloniality**

I became the artistic director of SNDO in September 2014. A couple of weeks into my post a student of Color, Nadia Bekkers, entered my office and said: 'SNDO is white.'

They were mid-way through the studies at SNDO, just starting their third year, when they led me through not only own experiences as students of Color – whereby the lack of anything other than Eurocentric literature, references and responses to their work were making their study unfair, stressful, and alienating – but also pointing at these not as subjective experiences, but as systemic operations within the school culture and curriculum, on top of the fact that the majority of students and teachers in the school were white.

Hitherto, certain students' works were considered and praised as 'good art', while works which spoke

from minoritized positions were dismissed, both by the staff and peers, as 'lesser art'. Most references, texts and syllabuses centered on the white postmodern legacy of contemporary dance, and in a context where the majority of teachers were not PoC, this created an environment of isolation and non-relatability for PoC students.

In 2015, I initiated the Curriculum Development Board (CDB) – a structure to allow students, teachers and team members to come together to investigate relevant aspects of the SNDO program. Four CDB groups were established: *On Movement*, *On Theory*, *Decolonize the Curriculum* and *On Blocks*.

The idea was to zoom into and scrutinize the status and different approaches to movement, place and language around technique or body in SNDO. Likewise, theory courses teachers got together for the first time in a long time, to share their own approaches, syllabuses, aims of the courses as well as to reflect on the canons and references carried through them.

One important aim was that the knowledge and discussions from one group seep into and enter the explorations of the others. In each group, besides me, there were one or two other members, who would also be present in one of the other groups. This proved to be a particularly important strategy, very quickly leading to realizations on different fronts about what needed attention.

In the three-year run of the CDB, *the Decolonize the Curriculum* group became the main hub that brought to the surface what needed to be changed in the curriculum. Even if it started in mixity, with teachers and

From the outset the notion of whiteness was structurally noted and explored within SNDO. Whiteness here referred to a set of behaviors instead of ethnicity per se. These behaviors comprise – for example – so-called 'color blindness' and consequent disregard for concerns and lived experiences of daily oppression and violence towards people of color; the idea of living in an 'open' post-racial western European society producing an obliviousness to one's own positionality depending on 'race', gender or class and more specifically the oppressions which one experiences when these traits intersect; being unaware of, what Prof. Gloria Wekker calls the cultural archive, which is a set of ideas that posit the white European subject above the people who got racialized by and through European colonization. In her book *White Innocence* (2016) she is more specifically referring to the Dutch society, but the ideas can be easily translated to a wider European history and formation of ideas and ideals. The concept of white supremacy continues to shape that cultural archive, inform worldviews and guide behaviors in today's world. It simultaneously keeps the distribution of resources, availability and access to institutions, knowledge and advancement limited to specific groups, predominantly of white European ethnicity.

students as equals in the room, with time I realized that the teachers' presence stopped students from speaking openly about their experiences in the classroom. This is when I started issuing the invitation to students only. This is when the *Decolonize the Curriculum* group *de facto* became a safe space for marginalized and students of color who for the first time got a chance to bring to the table the painful experiences they faced during their study. To name just a few, these experiences included: the lack of reference to anything outside the western Eurocentric canon by some teachers; overcome by prejudice of how the works of artists of color are contextualized or read by peers; and white students' dismissal of these experiences as not being racist or relevant. This inflicted pain and had a negative impact on the quality of study for our PoC students.

Proceeding with this knowledge into the discussions with other CDB groups, it resulted in important adjustments in the curriculum and became an ongoing dialogue on how to break through the whiteness of the school.

In this period all theory syllabuses were reviewed, conversations held with teachers, and the Eurocentric and USA-centric discourses actively questioned and unpacked. Courses like "Thinking Through Gender" and "Philosophy" took the decolonial and intersectional 'turn.'

It was important to have all theory teachers together in one room, whereby they could share with each other their readers, focuses and approaches. The great outcome of holding these sessions was that the shift in readers, references and canon did not happen as an external operation, but rather as a result of collective process

and shared commitment to making syllabuses up to date with, but also shaping the developments in the field.

A great side effect of these exchanges was teachers realizing that some of the texts in their readers could be in dialogue with what students were reading in another course. This led to more conscious choices in the succession of the theory input throughout the four years of study.

I will name here some of the programs which entered the SNDO curriculum. The lineup is neither exhaustive nor complete but does justice to material consequences of organizing the Curriculum Development Board as a platform and the Decolonize the Curriculum efforts.

Courses like "Art and the Political" were introduced and later a two-week workshop on Self-care (by Nadia Bekkers), a course which opened reflection with the students on the experience of their study with regards to different positionalities. For instance, awareness of the extra labor and hardships experienced by students from non-EU countries (higher tuition fee, limited possibility to earn income due to visa's without the working permit, etc.) became more visible to peers. But more importantly the very idea of positionality as something that shapes different students' experience of belonging and experiencing the world was brought to light.

The "Shame research lab" (by Joy Mariama Smith) entered the curriculum, a place where students would for the first time structurally start thinking through whiteness as a concept related to a set of behaviors, rather than referring to one's skin color or ethnicity. An impor-

tant part of this workshop is the introduction to the text [White supremacy culture](#) (1999) by Tema Okun.

The “Art and the Political” course entered the curriculum through a week long residency program curated by Quinsy Gario, in collaboration with association Ons Suriname, current home to [The Black Archives](#), which at that time was just emerging. This residency workshop was divided into closed sessions for students only and the public program open for everyone. The public program included lectures by

Rolando Vasquez, assistant professor of Sociology at the University College Roosevelt of Utrecht University in The Netherlands, whose work brings together a variety of fields such as: critical theory, continental philosophy, post-structuralism, decolonial thinking, visual studies and aesthetics.

Teresa Maria Dias Nerio, researcher, visual and performance artist whose investigation often focuses on subjects informed by the history of colonial and neocolonial invasions in the Global South, challenging the Eurocentric and US centric notions of who is who and what is what.

Amal Alhaag, curator, researcher and co-founder of several initiatives, developing an ongoing experimental and collaborative research practice, public programs and projects on global spatial politics,

<sup>1</sup> The Academy of Theatre and Dance is one of six academies that make up Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK). The others are: Academy of Architecture; Breitner Academy; Conservatorium van Amsterdam; Netherlands Film Academy and Reinwardt Academy.

archives, colonialism, counter-culture, oral histories and popular culture.

Nancy Jouwe was one of the initiators of Framer Framed and of the Mapping Slavery NL project, which maps out traces of the Dutch role in the history of slavery. Her particular interest is in women’s studies, gender and ethnicity, Papua heritage and identity and cross-cultural art projects.

Natalia Truchi, organizer who worked as head of communications for Greenpeace International, ActionAid. She was a journalist for many years and then crossed the bridge of news to work with NGOs on food security, women’s rights and environment.

<https://www.ahk.nl/en/research/artist-in-residence/2016-2017/quincy-gario/>

Following the public kick-off residency in 2016, this workshop entered the regular curriculum and was held at the Association Ons Suriname and The Black Archive premises until the pandemic in 2020.

Choreographer Fannie Sosa was invited to teach a movement workshop within the 2017 edition of the SNDO “Thinking through Gender” block. Alongside exploration, in the words of the artist themselves: *of awakening the pleasurable moving body and a choreographic writing process that stemmed from questioning power and privilege*, together with Nadia Bekkers and Fannie Sosa, SNDO supported a closed workshop for ATD students

of Color, which was also open for external interested Afro-descendant dancers.

To close the week in celebratory ways, within this program, Nadia curated a party in the squat Vrankrijk, where Fannie Sosa was a DJ.

The collaboration with DAS Choreography student Cecilia Lisa Eliceche, within her graduation program Caribbean thinkers for a new Europe, brought renowned Jamaican scholar Nadia Ellis for a week long workshop, where SNDO students committed to an in-depth reading of the work of Aimé Césaire, as well as Prof. Ellis presenting a public lecture within the SNDO Friday Afternoon, bringing into the room imaginations and materiality of movement from Kingston Dancehall to New Orleans' bounce to our bodies at the ATD.

Parallely to the changes at the SNDO I was actively advocating with then lector Marijke Hoogenboom and ATD director Jan Zoet on the importance of doing this work on a much wider scale in the ATD. Prompted by the Maagdenhuis occupation from February 2015, in 2016 an important report [“Let’s do diversity”](#) research conducted on state of diversity at UvA, led by Prof. Gloria Wekker was published. This caused the notions of diversity and inclusion to also start appearing on the agenda of the ATD and the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) to which it belongs. Together with colleagues from other dance departments who were in different ways, and through different prisms already busy with it, we initiated the first ATD diversity working group.

While diversity and inclusion became the notions that the AHK and ATD were shyly making steps to engage with, and while other dance departments had years-long engagement with transculturality, for SNDO research and processes it was important to bring the specific frameworks of anti-racism, decoloniality and intersectionality to the table, to engage with creating a more socially just and safe environment for minoritized students and staff.

The workgroup had several meetings and one group session with all artistic directors and heads of support departments where, on my initiative, we invited the guest researcher Nana Adusei-Poku. The weak state of the ATD's leadership awareness around discrimination, racism, decoloniality, diversity, inclusion and social justice was transparent in this session. It is not irrelevant to note here that the artistic directors who actively engaged and recognized the need for change, were at that time all female and from the dance departments of the ATD. White, cis-male colleagues received the session as 'difficult and heavy'.

The conclusions of our workgroup were summarized in two main recommendations and offered to Jan Zoet, the then director of the academy:

that ATD conducts a thorough research on both narrative experiences and discrimination of students and staff of color as well as more technical, so called 'zero measuring' to bring to visibility the homogeneity of the ATD when it comes to ethnicity, 'race', sexuality and gender across various positions.

Amplifying the recommendations from the report “Let’s do diversity” we advocated for a formation of a permanent diversity point at the ATD – a budgeted position and a team with decision making power and authority within ATD. This team, headed by a diversity officer would be providing support for the students who experience discrimination, the departments as they undergo transformation and have authority to articulate and implement the diversity policy of ATD.

Unfortunately, the ATD management did not embrace this. The focus seemed to be on devising a quicker policy plan – a paper to be written. The AHK set out a task that each faculty should have a diversity and inclusion policy, so the writing of the policy, without first doing the thorough research was a chosen path.

This is where the 1st diversity committee stepped down as we could not write a policy plan with a less than substantial approach to the issue, which in so many impactful ways determined how our students and staff studied and worked in this environment.

Nevertheless, we continued to advocate for the relevance of the two above mentioned points and continued doing the work within our departments.

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The SNDO *Decolonize the Curriculum* group, brought questions to the surface, which go deep into the very structures of the dance and performance field and politics of power. One issue which got raised as a result

of an incident in Contact Improvisation workshop was the question of consent in dance. A student voiced their discontent and pain experienced when another student gave themselves permission to do a diminishing and degrading physical gesture during the workshop. When the affected student spoke out, this was dismissed by the peer as a ‘playful’ gesture during the improvisation.

To be able to explore this collectively and avoid the blame and shame atmosphere (as everyone has the right to learn from their mistakes), I decided to curate a program on “Consent in Dance and Performance”.

The lack of research, language or thinking around consent in dance was rampantly evident when, at the end of 2017, I could not find more than a handful of articles on consent in dance related to ballroom dance and three related to contact improvisation. It was clear that contemporary dance and performance researchers were hitherto not thinking much about it. However, the issue was real and the question pertinent.

To bring the exploration to visibility and to contribute to starting the necessary conversation, in January 2018 SNDO organized a two day program “On Consent In Dance and Performance” with guests Ilse Ghekiere, Joy Mariama Smith and Eroca Nicols, who in different ways were pioneers in researching the consent in our field.

<https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/news-and-events/half-6/past-half6-editions/2017-2018/9-january-2018/>

Following this public kick-off, two things became a permanent part of SNDO curriculum: one is a yearly workshop with Eroca Nicols, on touch and consent in contact improvisation and physical practices. The other is an ongoing inquiry on consent in art by Joy Mariama Smith, who brings their research into the 3rd year mentorship. For more insights into the Joy's research, please see their essay in this publication.

The outcomes of running the Curriculum Development Board were not treated as topics and themes which pass with public events. Rather, public events were strategically deployed as an invitation for the larger community to engage with issues, as well as a publicly cast promise to ourselves as to what is relevant and requires engagement.

In the period 2014-2017 – as a guide of these transformative processes – I lacked dialogue partners inside the academy. To sustain the work and make things move further, it was needed to team up with scholars, artists and organizations outside the academy, who carried the knowledge and were doing the anti-racist work.

In dialogue with then gender theory teacher Mikki Stelder, who was on their way to undertake a research trip to University of California Santa Cruz to work with Professor Gina Dent, we started concocting the idea of inviting Dent to Amsterdam as well as her partner, anti-racist powerhouse Professor Angela Davis.

What started as a bit of a daring lucid dreaming, in about two years developed into a large-scale collaboration across organizations, institutes and individual artists,

activists and scholars resulting in a week-long program *Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education – A Week with Angela Davis*.

Leading up to the program, within SNDO and ATD we organized contextual preparation trajectory for the community to be able to engage in depth with the contents of the week and with the various aspects of Davis's work.

One session was hosted by our student, Naomie Pieter – one of the prominent figures in the *Kick out Zwarte Piet* campaign – who invited us to reflect on the relationship between Angela Davis's work, Black liberation and speculative fiction.

The other session was a lecture by Mikki Stelder on life long prison abolition work of Angela Davis and Gina Dent.

We purchased 50 copies of Angela Davis's seminal book *Women, Race & Class* (1981), which was distributed to all SNDO students and team members. Then philosophy teacher Thijs Witty held a weeklong workshop with SNDO 2 and 3, engaging in an in-depth reading of this work.

## **Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education – A week with Angela Davis**

*Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education – A week with Angela Davis* took place from 12-17 May 2018 across venues, contexts and partner organizations in Amsterdam and partly in Utrecht.

Our starting premise for making this program was articulated in the following ways:

artists, educators and activists have often been at the forefront of challenging social and cultural hierarchies within society. Events of the past decade have highlighted a noticeable increase in authoritarianism, racism, sexism, environmental disasters and economic hardship at local and global levels. This turbulent climate has prompted significant responses in the form of social movements calling for more inclusion, decolonization, and liberation within cultural and educational institutions.

In what ways are artists, educators and activists re-energizing cultural and knowledge production in the Netherlands? In what ways can institutions help mobilize these efforts towards creating a more just society for all? Armed with thoughts, books, poetry and dance *Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education* aims to connect social, cultural, and educational institutions and initiatives in order to address themes of social justice, equality, artistic production and education, and share the emancipatory practices that emerge within these fields with a larger public.

This rich institutional network allowed for dense, content-driven programming. Besides our guests of honor, professor Angela Davis and Gina Dent, the program hosted and engaged with artists, activists and scholars: Benedicta, Chihiro Geuzebroek, Diego Segatto, Flavia Dzodan, Gloria Wekker, Hodan Warsame, Isshaq Al-Barbary, Jessica de Abreu, Joy Mariama Smith, Maria Guggenbichler, Melvin Fraenk, Mitchell Esajas, Nancy Jouwe, Native Moons, Nawal Mustafa, Olave Basabose, Rae Parnell, Sepake Angiama, SRP, Tirsia With, Tom van Wee and many more.

The curatorial team were Amal Alhaag, Quinsy Gario, Nadia Bekkers, Mikki Stelder and myself with some of the programs supported by Mitchell Esajas, Jessica de Abreu and Maria Guggenbichler.

<https://www.ahk.nl/en/research/artist-in-residence/2017-2018/angela-davis/>

This is a project I am incredible proud of. It was a necessary anti-racist hub and energy boost for everyone who was working on a more just society in Amsterdam through hitherto more singularized initiatives. It gathered around 2000 people and had significant impact and resonance at SNDO and across Amsterdam.

## 2019-2021: Critical whiteness

Following the Week with Angela Davis, the next step was needed to make the processes continue. In 2018, artist and educator Joy Mariama Smith joined the SNDO core team and besides becoming the mentor of 3rd year students, together we engaged in developing the *Research initiative SNDO Critical Whiteness, volume 2*. Our aim was to provide continuity and sustain the efforts of transforming the school further. The fact that we are a school meant that each year a whole generation leaves, with whom also some knowledge, invested labor and language leave. As contextualized within the blue texts, we wanted to create ongoing and ad hoc platforms and programs for the community to critically and transformatively engage with the notion of whiteness. We aimed at not only raising awareness, but also articulating and creating language around social change, justice and ethics further.

Within this program, Joy connected us to and worked on inviting choreographers Ishmael Houston-Jones and Keith Hennessy to work with our students. Within a weeklong workshop students engaged in multi-directional exploration of body, movement and dance under the racialized regimes and ethics of different positionalities the two artists embody. A public presentation and performance talk of the artists was also offered as a special treat for a wider ATD community. Distilling from decades of both friendship and improvisation practice Ishmael Houston-Jones and Keith Hennessy talked/performed/improvised, looking for ways to ask questions,

In 2019 we observed the school further and recognized the necessity to continue to engage in this important work. One pertinent obstacle to a sustainable transformation of the school (besides the societal context) is the fact that in an international school such as SNDO (ATD) we deal with an annual influx of new students coming from across geographies and contexts where the notion of whiteness is, if addressed at all, considered in very disparate ways. Likewise, as a school that works with a large amount of freelance artists who are not engaged in-depth in the developments within the school on a daily basis, it remained important to devise ongoing programs and platforms for the learning and transformation to happen on all levels.

To that end, SNDO core-team member and 3rd year mentor Joy Mariama Smith and SNDO artistic director Bojana Mladenovic were engaged in the Critical Whiteness Research Initiative – a dynamic ongoing action based engagement aimed at structurally and critically addressing whiteness. A next step in this initiative was to provide ongoing and ad hoc platforms and programs for the community to critically and transformatively engage with the notion of whiteness. We were aiming not only at raising awareness, but also articulating and creating language around social change, privilege or ethics in art. Developing sensitivities to types of discrimination, violence, and the visible and invisible labor of students of color were all part of this trajectory.

spark conversations, and figure out how to dance together from inside and outside of racialized gazes, expectations and power dynamics.

<https://www.atd.ahk.nl/half6/past-half6-editions/2019-2020/15-january-2020-ishmael-houston-jones-and-keith-hennessy/>

Planned for 2020 and postponed for a year and a half, in December 2021 we then hosted Professor Thomas DeFrantz. This program was curated and willfully held together, against the pandemic troubles and delays, by Joy Mariama Smith.

The two-week guest visit spanned a matrix of different programs. One central pillar was the workshop with SNDO 2nd and 3rd year students. Alongside this workshop, a session with ATD students of Color was held, where Prof. DeFrantz brought in the questions:

*Is everyone always automatically expected to share the concerns of people of color?*

*Do we all really have to pay attention to race, religion, sexuality, ethnicity?*

*What constitutes “white privilege?”*

*If I am not interested in being part of some solution, am I really part of the problem?*

We were honored to host his performance WHITE PRIVILEGE – a dialogic performance manifesto with collaborator musician Quran Karriem, in the Dan-

cetheatre at the ATD. White Privilege is an improvised lecture transcribed and performed as an investigation with the sonic input of a SenseBall, an electronic device that sounds in relation to gesture. This performance choreographs words and sounds to suggest an assembly of difference and resistance, to explore concepts of social assembly using the tools of the lecture as a theatrical event.

Lastly, a conversation between Thomas DeFrantz, Laura Cull (lector and Head of DAS Graduate School) and Joy Mariama Smith was hosted for a small live audience at the Graduate School and live streamed via Twitch.

<https://www.facebook.com/SNDO.amsterdam/photos/a.1582662085284155/2996378700579146/>

Besides these workshops and public programs Joy initiated the creation of a communal document where SNDO students and core team discuss and develop the culture we want to study and grow in. This collaborative document-platform is to serve the community, to actively engage in articulating notions around how to together carry the school as an ethical, oppression free and safe environment.

The first sessions were held in 2019, follow up ensued, mid pandemic in May 2020, where in an online SNDO parliament session we worked through the first rough draft of the document. This important work was then picked up in February 2022, resulting in SNDO Care Document, a publication to be carried further by the com-

munity. The initial range of topics, the SNDO team inventoried, which the document covers, are: Racism & whiteness, Financial precarity, Communication and responsiveness, Touch and consent in physical practices, Self-care and communal care, Gender and sexuality, Safety, High ambitions and disparate individual agendas, Peer support, Capacity for caring, celebration and humor, and more.

On behalf of SNDO in 2019 Joy joined the 2nd ATD diversity-working group. As a result of our conversations and concerns, several things got moved, one of which being the ATD providing support for safe spaces for minoritized students. An LGBTQAI+ group, PoC sessions, etc. became a thinkable form of providing students with safe and comfortable spaces to navigate the school complexities and discrimination they are exposed to.

Lastly, Joy and I were starting to engage in the so-called coalition building initiative, when the 2020 pandemic hit and daily life, also of a choreography school, became of different order, and priorities ordered themselves in a particularly new and relentless ways.

### **Reflection on approaches**

As I am going through the layers of public and visible aspects of the anti-racist work at SNDO, I would be doing injustice to the complexity and relevance of it if I did not at least try to give some contours to the invisible and undocumented labor, which took place in the past years.

The public programs and workshops placed in the curriculum would not have been possible without the ongoing one-on-one dialogues with the teachers, prior, mid or after the course, and in particular the guidance sessions prior to courses in 2016 and 2017, when the anti-racist language was unfamiliar and many non-PoC SNDO students did not know how to approach some of the contents.

It was important to keep racism on the table in the core team persistently and to take the team along at a calm but consistent pace, to address the incidents, reflect on students' feedback, share articles and links that could contextualize the experienced whiteness of SNDO. This was always done in a non-confrontational way, even if the topics were confronting. I believe in trusting that the team is full of responsible professionals and that giving pointers and opening space for development of language and thinking around racism and the needed anti-racism is the right path to take. Looking back I can confirm that it is.

The awareness and discourse developed steadily throughout the years in the SNDO core team.

I was acutely aware that direct confrontation with teachers' biases, willful ignorance and whiteness would lead to the teachers' potential defensiveness and retreat instead of engaging and changing. Therefore, I always opted for a general 'calling in' of the community of teachers into the need for developing awareness and own responsibility (naming concrete examples of what happens in the classroom but without attaching a teachers' name to it).

Follow up (on incidents, trauma and discrimination) was the approach towards students who experienced it – listening, empathy and affirming that the incident happened. Giving a clear signal that the student is seen and taken seriously, as well as that the incident will be followed up with the teachers and the team.

Then following it up with the teacher – dialogue, feedback, offering a possibility to be aware of the impact of the racist incident, and for learning.

If I were to summarize my approaches of choice, they would be as follow:

- consciously keep dialogue ongoing and alive, even when seemingly there are no issues or incidents at present.
- ‘call in’
- bring incidents to the table – shed light on what happened.
- follow up on incidents. In two separate trajectories, offer mending of the pains to the hurt one and offer feedback and possibility for learning for the one who inflicted pain. Monitor the recovery of the first and effects of the feedback on the latter.
- follow up on follow up (important reminder to self: follow up on follow up!)

## Experiments in financial equity

All Curriculum Development Board contributions of teachers and students were paid. Initially, everyone was paid the standard teaching hourly rate of euro 30. In 2017, the ATD education development committee, chaired by Jan Zoet, decided that students cannot be paid more than the student rate of 17.50.

Everyone who engaged with anti-racism work at SNDO both in Decoloniality period as well as SNDO Critical Whiteness, volume 2 was paid an appropriate fee.

### 2022 onward: Anti-racism 3.0

- Recommendations for the work ahead:
- overarching programs intended to keep the conversation on the table for everyone in the ATD: students specific, educational staff specific, support staff specific.
  - structure the process. Pay contributors.
  - bring external partners to expand research and labor to another level.
  - particular attention given to the development of awareness and support in working through fear of overall teachers and support staff of ATD when it comes to anti-racism.
  - develop de-escalation competence of all staff (educational and support), to be able to respond appropriately when tensions arise and incidents happen.

- introduce and develop trauma informed approaches to all forms of dialogue, as well as on follow up on incidents and de-escalation
- particular attention given to development of diversity and anti-racist competence of all heads of support departments, so that they can be agents of change within wider ATD and offer guidance and support to their team members. (Right now (some) artistic directors are actively engaging in this work. If it is to make sense, this needs to be picked up and rapidly developed within the rest of the support departments of ATD).
- employing people who already either have diversity and inclusion competence or clearly demonstrated the willingness to develop it.
- support structure. Internal safe space and coalition building place.
- visibility of labor and the tools to share the labor, knowledge and make it sustainable.
- credit given where credit is due.
- ongoing challenge: Every year a new group of students from disparate contexts. Pervasiveness of whiteness globally makes that – to a degree, every year we start from zero with some basic awareness around how racism operates and how everyone, including students themselves, reproduces and perpetuates it when not aware of it.
- positionality, engagement and ‘troubles’ of students from what is widely considered East Europe. The specific complexities of ‘former East’

- are rarely elaborated on or even mentioned, and therefore we skip to offer an entrance of our East European body of students into the anti-racist exploration, learning and solidarity. It causes a sense of exclusion, lack of relation and often in the first instance a self-protective resistance. As we know all learning happens from a place of being seen and acknowledged, and so this question of how to invite East European students in a more constructive and ‘calling in’ ways remains a challenge. This requires further research, literature and considered contextual approach.
- consider a paid position of D&I officer with a team who will oversee and influence the policy and its effects.  
For the time being instead of conclusion: a kind of conclusion: effects of this labor are real. SNDO students across the board leave the school with a competence, knowledge and awareness which make them more well-rounded artists as well as agents of change through their work.

### **When will this work be finished?**

Having the pandemic, the uprising after George Floyd’s brutal murder, Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020, but also the recent racist experiences of people of Color fleeing the war alongside Ukrainian refugees, it is clear why this work is pertinent to our times, and why an art school which cares about life, ethics and politics

of body and movement needs to be an active agent in fighting racism.

This work will be finished when the world is transformed into a non-racist place, where the discussion is not on the table anymore, not because it is invisible but because racism is eradicated.

The other parameter to measure when SNDO can finish with this work, is when its students, teachers and team members of Color experience and say that SNDO is not a white education.

On both accounts, we have a long way ahead.

Amsterdam, February 2022

# Decolonizing theater in the dark

*Marine  
Bachelot-Nguyen*

Author and director, I am one of the founding members of Decolonizing the Arts, a collective created in 2015 to demand a better presence and representation of racialized people and artists in decision-making positions, programming, on stage, screen and training grounds – in order to make up for the democratic and sensitive deficit that excludes, discriminates against and makes invisible those who represent about 30% of the French population. More fundamentally, Decolonizing the Arts advocates for the decolonization of the imaginary, which passes through a transformation of dominant narratives and stereotypical views, through the support by the arts of stories related to colonization, diasporas and slavery, all too often misunderstood, forgotten or passed over in silence. Because this little explored and undigested past weighs upon the present, it perpetuates colonial, racist clichés and legacies, undermines consciences, and makes today's France explosive. Art and culture must confront these questions, not remain a sector out of touch with reality, with incandescent and urgent points of society. It is also about fighting against assignments, defending the freedom of racialized artists to seize the subjects and aesthetics they desire.

## **Decolonizing one's art: another matter!**

### **Proclaiming activism is one thing, practicing it is another.**

One does not decolonize one's writing or stage production with bold statements filled with theoretical intentions and pure activism. It results from attempting, fixing, researching forms and mixed dramaturgies, to enhance decolonized speeches and sensitivities. A daunting task of trial and error and observation in which the method invents itself step by step. An evolutionary process, full of pitfalls and mistakes, awareness and feedback. A never-ending work of emancipation, which goes back and forth between the individual and the collective, circulating between self-consciousness and the gaze of others, moments of self-criticism and responsibility. At least that's how I feel.

### **Decolonizing ourselves.**

In any relationship of domination there is oppression and alienation. Colonial or postcolonial relations do not escape this syntax, and the artist, including the racialized artist, is caught between these games that tear them apart. The dominated often find themselves locked in a painful, tricky alternative. They either want to look like the dominator – that is to say, to imitate their practices, adopt their codes, sometimes mimic them up to the point of discomfort; or they want to please, seduce them,

seek their company (even become their personal object), and do everything to make them forget (others but also in their own eyes) their status as oppressed. In both cases, it is a form of allegiance to the dominant and dominance, as well as to established forms of power. How can we invent other ways of resistance, singular assertions, emancipation from the system, inventing new powers, models, of empowerment and collective action?

Alienation passes through representation and the image that one has of oneself. Just like other oppressed or minoritized categories: the dominant imagination (image) (Western and structurally racist, masculine, and structurally sexist, bourgeois, colonial, heteronormative, ableist, etc.) is also the crucible where racial awareness is formed, where our visions, projections, desires are developed.

### **Where I'm coming from.**

As far as I'm concerned, I benefit without a doubt from a certain mixed-race privilege. Before I chose to add my mother's name to my surname (after her death in 2013) and highlight that Vietnamese side, my ethnic origin remained discrete. I have experienced exoticism, but no ethnic identification or violent racism or discrimination. Two intertwined threads have asserted themselves in my work: feminist and postcolonial questions (at least the idea of re-emerging, under today's racist mechanisms, traces of the past and the colonial system). Retrospectively, I realized that if these questions were recurrent and obsessive in my plays it was obviously due to antiracist conviction,

but it is also linked to my role suspended or repressed as a colonized descendant.

Let's just say that Indochina seems far away, that French Asians are invisible. Let us also say that, in recent years, racism and discrimination have been massively unleashed in France against Arabs and Blacks, veiled Muslim women, immigrants and undocumented immigrants. And the theatre, absorbing the news and current events that I describe, was bound to face these subjects.

For the past ten years, I have written fictions and documentaries about administrative detention centers and the deportations of undocumented persons (*Parc des expulsions, Tabaski, La place du chien*<sup>1</sup>). I have written on the common mechanisms of racism and sexism, and the instrumentalisation of feminism for racist purposes ("*La femme, ce continent noir...*" *À la racine, La place du chien*). I have written on the stigma and exclusion of veiled Muslim women (*Rebel girlz mascarade, Est-ce que tu crois que je doive m'excuser quand il y a des attentats? Akila le tissu d'Antigone*<sup>2</sup>). These are fictions that put into play and give voices to Black, white, Arab, Muslim, Christian characters, who also carry the social or symbolic position they embody. They are fictions on highly political subjects, but where the risks of clichés are present: where simplification, projection, exoticism, or humanitarianism can quickly catch up at a turning point.

1 Marine Bachelot Nguyen, *La Place du chien : sitcom canin et postcolonial*, Editions Lansman 2018.

2 Marine Bachelot Nguyen, *Akila, le tissu d'Antigone*, Editions Lansman 2020.

How can we overcome or avoid these pitfalls? And how, as authors, do we ethically and legitimately speak on behalf of people whom we are not ourselves, of situations we do not always experience? How do we ask ourselves these questions, without self-censorship?

My 2016 production of *Les ombres et les lèvres*<sup>3</sup> was a turning point. It deals with homosexuality and the LGBT movement in Vietnam. I've been talking about it since I came here as a French person of Vietnamese origin; as a woman and a lesbian. This re-focusing and re-anchoring came at a very precise moment in my journey. It allowed me to enjoy a more explicitly situated form of writing, in a documentary performance that was intimate, personal and collective.

I decided to continue the thread of political and intimate memoirs of France-Vietnam with *Circulations Capitales*<sup>4</sup>, and extend it with *Nos corps empoisonnés* and *Boat People*. Developing this gesture seems important to me today, without confining myself to it.

### **Innovative dramatic Arts, defined knowledge and an overflow of universalism**

Despite the devaluation of political and militant theatre in the history of the arts, I have always had the intimate conviction that a politicized theatre was potentially a carrier of aesthetics and new forms, inventive and innovative dramaturgies. Meyerhold, Piscator or Brecht said it, wrote it, proved it. A revolutionary discourse is

3 Marine Bachelot Nguyen, *Les Ombres et les Lèvres*, Editions Lansman 2018.

4 Marine Bachelot Nguyen, *Circulations capitales*, Editions Lansman 2021.

accompanied by new dramatic quality, and to be incisive, the statement must forge a relevant aesthetic form.

To encounter performances and writings that are part of a decolonial process, I realize how often they are scholarly, dense, interwoven, hybrid and passionate dramaturgies. Something new is being created, tinkered with, elaborated, that is not formatted, that mixes aesthetics and cultural references, that thinks and plunges hands into the depths of history and memory that speaks from very singular places. These are works that bear the imprint of their political project and of the artists who develop them, of their mixed cultural affiliations.

At the end of *La France est notre patrie*<sup>5</sup>, a documentary made up of archival images from the colonial era, Cambodian director Rithy Panh writes: “The images are playing us. I edited them in silence, in my native way. In this way, they teach us to look. To look at them.”

This phrase struck me. Should we claim an “indigenous way” of producing shows? In any case, we can claim localized knowledge, localized sensitivities. Artistic gestures which derive legitimacy precisely from the subjectivity of their roots and which affirm with determination their place in the universal.

Racialized artists find themselves confronting a dominant ideology and programmers who often refer to their particularisms, judge their work “not universal”, question their lack of distance from the subjects dealt with and do not see the value of such themes. Frivolity, ignorance, Western-centric universalism, white, mascu-

5 Rithy Panh, *La France est notre Patrie*, Bophana Productions, documentary, 2015.

line, bourgeois, heteronormative values are unfortunately still deeply rooted in the theatrical milieu. Artists with a decolonial approach work precisely to decentralize, destabilize, transcend this falsely neutral and objective universalism. They work to enrich an authentic universal, which would be the sum of all particularisms, the polyphony of all narratives, crossroads of multiple voices and bodies, the infinite sum of subjectivities and points of view, the emergence of missing narratives and minority cultures.

But we sometimes find ourselves groping around those who have power and money, and on whom we depend. We do not dare to make the more radical gestures we really want; we self-censor for fear of punishment. To soften our actions, measure words, reassure, to take roundabout paths. In short, to live the frustration of being dominated. These zigzag strategies are not only negative: everything depends on actions and works they produce. Without paying allegiance to power, we can work on chipping it away to attempt discrete shots or free kicks, patiently digging the furrow, rather than expose ourselves to being completely ejected from the circuit.

To this we add – as of now – the appropriation of subjects on racism or diversity by white artists, who have never worked on these issues before, but capitalize on trends, sometimes flirt with cultural appropriation, often make objects that are formatted enough, and have difficulty realizing that they take other artists’ place. Yet for producers, it seems more reassuring and consensual.

In addition, the public is usually more visionary and less cautious than most professionals. They know how to welcome with enthusiasm, interest and recognition the proposed forms and the displayed narratives, the density and the interlacing of questions deeply thought out through the knowledge and the sensitivities of these shows, caring little enough that they do not match the dominant aesthetics.

### Finding the colonial

To continue the reflection on my own work a little more, here are some axes and non-exhaustive examples, which are, again, indecisive.

Working to find remains of colonial ideology, in the present, is a recurring theme in many of my plays, whether they are fictional or documentaries.

In *La place du chien (sitcom canin et postcolonial)*, I bring into play the turbulent story of a cross cultural couple: Karine, a young white precarious French woman, and Silvain, a Congolese musician, fall in love. But Sherkan, Karine's black labrador, with whom she has a fusional relationship, creates tensions in their budding romance. This vaudevillian scenario is gradually contaminated by politics and resurgences of the colonial past. It undermines the couple's daily life; it traces a relationship of rivalry and brotherhood between Silvain and Sherkan: L.O.F certifications of pedigree for the dog as opposed to Silvain's falsified passport, colonial songs of the 1930s, ambiguous extracts of the Dakar speech...Silvain will end up imprisoned and

behind bars in an administrative detention center, while the dog will remain "on a leash, but outside" before a final reversal, in the form of a canine manifesto.

In *Akila, le tissu d'Antigone*, I transpose the myth of Antigone around a terrorist's sister who starts wearing the Muslim head veil in her high school, causing a crisis, and unleashing intense emotions. Akila tries to understand the fate of her two dead brothers, one as a terrorist, the other killed in a police crime. To examine this typically French obsession with the head veil, I go back to the unveiling ceremonies in Algeria, as to the colonial heritage in the management of the working-class neighborhoods in France.

In *Les ombres et les lèvres*, I discover that the French colonization in Indochina was accompanied by a strengthening of the heterosexual order and a repression of homosexuality. The gendered indetermination of the natives, theorized as a sign of civilizational inferiority, justifies the civilizing enterprise. How can we not draw a line between this colonial ideology and the obsession of French supporters of "La Manif Pour Tous" <sup>6</sup>for the heterosexual order, the impervious categories of boys and girls, and the fear of gendered indetermination? In the 2010s in Vietnam, gays, lesbians and trans people assert themselves and display themselves, in public and media spaces as well as on social media, from the south to the north of the country. The Vietnamese government's pinkwashing, the United States' neo-imperi-

<sup>6</sup> A political organization in France which is responsible for demonstrations and actions in opposition to laws enabling same-sex marriage.

alism through the LGBT movement, the invisible weight of the colonial past and the change of course of the Communist Party... Reality is complex and intertwined. My show tries to account for these many intricacies, different layers and historical influences. Sometimes, it leads to furious paradoxes.

*“La femme, ce continent noir...”* is a solo for an actress, who wants to dissect Freud’s famous and questionable metaphor on female sexuality. Freud refers to it, rapidly in the blink of an eye, looking back at a very well-known work of the time, *Through the Dark Continent* by Sir Henry Morton Stanley. This British journalist and explorer crossed Equatorial Africa, worked for Leopold II in the conquest of the Congo, and declared “I hate this continent with all my heart”... This performance-conference allows me to highlight the ambiguous mechanics of exotic stereotypical designations of “the other one” (mixing fascination, mythification, contempt, interiorization and dehumanization), to deconstruct the notion of the “Universal” (“a translucent look that defines us and sculpts us as it pleases”, depicted on stage by a transparent dildo-phallus). The play also has some gaps in understanding. It is performed by a white actress, who covers her body with black paint – which I would now do with more prudence or awareness. The instrumentation of colonization or slavery metaphors in favor of white feminism is another pitfall: the simple comparison of the mechanics of racism and sexism can lead to avoid effects of crossing and multiple discrimination, at the core of the practice of intersectionality.

## Refine and foil racial stereotypes, an attempt to defuse exoticism

The decolonization of the imaginary passes also into the field of representation, through the proliferation and diversification of models of racialized characters. It is an indispensable project to carry out at a time when the majority of fiction suggests roles and figures of Blacks, Arabs, Maghrebis or Asians marked by racial stereotypes, tinged with exoticism, or confined to clichéd visions. And when the complex or prestigious models of racialized characters, to build and project oneself, are sorely lacking.

In my works, I have put into play undocumented character figures many times. The latter embodies a social reality, but also a possible humanitarian cliché, which can reduce the racialized characters to eternal victims. I confess that I have no other solution but to work on thickening and refining the characters, who are social types – by giving them the floor, showing them as resistant against a system that crushes them, making their psyche more complex, while avoiding Manicheanism. Loving their characters, even with their faults or cowardice, never taking away their dignity or subjectivity, is another principle to which I hold, as a creed and a safeguard.

Making racialized activist characters heard is an easier process, like Angela and Shérazade in *A la racine*, or Muslim feminists of Al Houda in *Est-ce que tu crois que je doive m’excuser quand il y a des attentats?*

They can rise up against orientalism, racism, imperialism, and speak a direct and complex political speech.

In *Les ombres et les lèvres*, I know that I must juggle with the risk of the spectator's exoticizing gaze on Vietnamese bodies, as on queer bodies. How can they exist with dignity, without being reduced and objectified? If I open the show on the projection of Maika Elan's photos showing same-sex Vietnamese couples seized in their daily intimacy, I suddenly look back in the following sequence, giving the floor to French settlers who, looking at the audience, comment on the physical, gender, appearance, and sexuality of the natives.

Even as a bicultural person, I am aware that my gaze is also forged by exoticism and colonial eroticism, images and the representation of Asian bodies that we have inherited from photography, literature or cinema. That the field is still a bit tricky... With the performers (two Whites and two Asians, who grew up in Europe), we work on measuring cultural borrowing, to assimilate ourselves with documentaries, capturing movement while being wary of the local color. A balance must be found: to give thanks to contemporary Vietnamese culture without exoticizing it, and above all bring the life of LGBT Vietnamese people closer to our French reality.

The varied score of the performers, in turn narrators carrying the author's story, then suddenly incarnating various characters or figures of the Vietnamese LGBT galaxy, also allows for role playing passages, a flow of identities that tries not to freeze anything.

## Utopias and pitfalls of casting

Having dozens of parts to cast and teams of interpreters from diverse ethnic backgrounds is always exciting, in terms of breaking expectations related to skin color. This leads to breaking obviousness and systematism, to play at redistributing cards – inventing utopia on stage of a society where everyone is free to embody any role, to be a multiple human, not limited or assigned to their ethnic appearance.

For many classic, contemporary pieces, skin color can be playfully neutral. The British have long understood this, directing Shakespeare with a multicultural cast. In France it still resists, reflecting a society that has trouble decolonizing its imagination.

However, skin color can also be dramatically significant. Especially when the narrative evokes racial tensions pervading our society, as is the case in several of my plays.

In the past, I made the mistake of building casts with one unique racialized person, who has thus found themselves alone to carry within their skin an experience of racial discrimination, in a show while speaking. Today, I am more attentive to my casts: it is a luxury to have a multitude of racialized interpreters, to ask questions of representation together, work on managing tensions that can arise from it, and together bearing the responsibility for what we show.

I also like that the people concerned represent their own biographical story. It was the case in *Circulations*

*Capitales (mémoires familiales France-Vietnam-Russie)*, developed with Marina Keltchewsky and François-Xavier Phan or in *Soeurs*, a reading-performance that I share with Penda Diouf and Karima El Kharraze. To go in the direction of a situated speech, simplicity, authenticity and universal resonances of the crossed stories of each.

There is still much to say and to dig into, and this remains a partial draft of reflection. If my theater is crossed by intersectional and postcolonial issues, I still have a long way to go, to keep forging my gesture and my decolonial theater. The continent to emerge is buried and enormous, made of stories, struggles, memories that were silenced, which bind the destiny of human beings from all over the world. More than to conquer, it is to lift up. It is also a project where we transform ourselves, learning from our mistakes and wanderings, reading, activism and collective discussions. Where we decolonize step by step. To feel that, even in the minority, there are more and more of us working on this project, multiplying the approaches, forging works to make it apprehensive and sensitive, inscribing gestures chiseled in the present and in history, giving courage in the coming reactionary times.

Translated by Léa-Surya Diouf

# Baldwin, theater and I

*Penda Diouf*

I often question myself on the number of panel discussions and seminars in which I have participated over the past few years, whose goal was to take stock on the issue of diversity in theater and perhaps think of viable and joint solutions. I do not know what remains of these conferences except perhaps the intense looks from racialized people fixing their gaze longer than usual, as if to make one understand the need to pronounce certain words with conviction and that they be heard. Of course, there are the informal discussions at the end of the roundtables, which are essential because they speak more intimately about the violence and invisibility. We speak less about numbers, quotas, absences and more about concrete examples and personal experiences of rejection, insults, integrated humiliation and buried silences. And from these informal talks, away from the lights and microphones, I remember certain points that I wish to share with you today. Because even though we racialized minority groups seem so isolated, the world of theater is small, and we all know each other. Languages speak in intimacy, creating a rhizome of words that expand, of implicit diffusion and underground and welcomed solidarity. Knowing someone in their difficulties mirrors our own interrogations. Knowing someone else in this context is always meeting a part of oneself, an echo. In this way, it is not in vain.

It is also a flaw that a lot of us share and carry within ourselves. We are inhabitants of silence and locked in a passivity by the historical narrative that did not take us into account and insisted on our defeats, without evoking resistance or examples of dignity. How does one speak

in this context? And what does one say? The majority narrative (no need to elaborate further, we all know what the narrative is) has been spread uniformly and hegemonically throughout the world. In France, we belong (as children belong to their parents) to a single and indivisible country. It is stated in the Constitution. Therefore, the national narrative cannot support other points of view, under penalty of creating an irreversible and growing breach capable of even engulfing this first narrative.

Thus, implicitly, we padlock it to preserve this first story. However, these minority narratives, if one has tried to suppress them for a long time, can no longer remain in the gaps, because the descendants are there: those who tried to resemble this republican idea, who filled the boxes related to education, to integration. They assimilated discretion. Yet discrimination in hiring, lodging, parties remains related to racism, skin color and assumed origin. The same goes for theater which, as in our society, remains imbued with these invisible stigma. The book “Noir n’est pas mon métier”<sup>1</sup> (Black is not my profession) by Aissa Maïga, is witness to this. Society is sick with racism, patriarchy, “impensés coloniaux” (which designates the persistence and resurgence or reformation of imaginary schemes to legitimize colonialism) and gaps in understanding Theater is not excluded.

France enjoys a good reputation, prestige and aura partly linked to its radical revolutions and avant-gar-

<sup>1</sup> Aïssa Maïga (dir.) et Nadège Beausson-Diagne, Mata Gabin, Maïmouna Gueye, Eye Haïdara, Rachel Khan, Sara Martins, Marie-Philomène Nga, Sabine Pakora, Firmine Richard, Sonia Rolland, Magaajyia Silberfeld, Shirley Souagnon, Assa Sylla, Karidja Touré et France Zobda, *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 3 mai 2018.

dism, to the Age of Enlightenment, and many political combats in terms of human rights. The country has long been considered as a host country (for immigrants). I’ve often been given the examples of artists like James Baldwin or Josephine Baker, who were welcomed in France after being segregated in their own country. People also speak to me about all these Afro-American soldiers who came to fight on the side of freedom during the First and Second World Wars. They could flirt with European women, being seen as heroes whereas in the United States they still risked being lynched for having looked a white woman in the eyes. This is what France is all about. Over the past few years, James Baldwin’s work has often been put on stage in France. This shows how essential his word is. It is witnessed in the success of Raoul Peck’s film “I Am Not Your Negro”. Yet Baldwin had a clear look on France and his own Afro-American privileges, while on the other side of the Mediterranean, the Algerian War was quietly being prepared. In his book, “No Name in the Street”<sup>2</sup> he testifies:

“It seemed to me that there was no point running away from American fantasies, to adhere to foreign fantasies.”

Later, he becomes more specific:

“Thank God I never had, and certainly not once I found myself living there, had never experienced the slightest romantic love for Paris. I didn’t come so much to Par-

<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the street*, Editions Ypsilon 1972.

is, as I had fled America. If I chose Paris, it was almost by closing my eyes and putting my finger on a map.” (Baldwin 1972)

In turn, he adds:

“In Paris “les misérables” are the Algerians. They slept four or five or six to a room in shifts, they were treated like animals, and they survived as best they could on the filthy and hostile pavement. The French accused them of being lazy because they appeared to spend most of their time sitting around drinking tea in their cafés. But they were not lazy. They were mostly unable to find work, and their rooms were freezing.(French students also spent most of their time in cafés for the same reason but no one saw them as lazy).” (Baldwin 1972)

Lastly, Baldwin speaks again more specifically about the relationship between the French and Algerian populations:

“The popular attitude, which had never been very friendly, and that of the police, which had always been menacing, became sneaky and wicked.” (Baldwin 1972)

If I speak so much about James Baldwin, it is because with Josephine Baker, he became the symbol of French hospitality and implicitly of the anti-racism of France. I hear that regularly, as a way to reassure ourselves and to prove that, in the end, we are not so bad and

corrupted by racism. However, at that time, France had colonies. James Baldwin and Josephine Baker were considered primarily as U.S. citizens. Moreover, how else can we place them since the tragedy of slavery severed all ties with their homeland? But this speech by James Baldwin is not the one presented on the French stage. This obviously shows a form of hierarchy between different geographic zones of migration, which still seems to exist today. At the beginning of the terrible war which unfortunately still rages in Ukraine, racist remarks about different types of migration were heard on the television.

“We are not talking about the Syrians who run away from bombing attacks. We are talking here about Europeans getting in their cars, which look like our cars, and hitting the road to try to save their lives.” Someone else tried to justify it thus continuing: “It’s not racism, it’s the law of proximity”.

This is what it comes down to. If I’m making this historical and mass media detour, it is to show that this French “schizophrenia” also infuses the theatrical world.

When I mention Baldwin and this hierarchization between cultures, I can also draw the same parallel to theater. I recently listened to Axel Arthéron, a university professor and specialist in francophone Caribbean theater. He explained at a panel at the University of Montpellier that the National Tropics Atrium Stage, like all national stages, hosted performances from metropolitan France. On the other hand, where are the Martinique artists and

performers on the metropolitan stages? I've looked for them and I'll let you do it as well.

He also said that it was just as difficult to be programmed in a francophone festival because artists from overseas are French. But in metropolitan France, there is no place for performances of these artists? So where to see them except on their island? Is this not a form of segregation when these artists are French? Yet expansions are possible. Directors such as Thomas Ostermeier and Falk Richter are very present in the various seasonal programs today. Good for them. But does metropolitan France have more ties with Germany, a white South African director like Brett Bailey or an Italian like Romeo Castellucci, who with his own departments were thousands of miles apart? How can we explain this "double standard" in terms of interest, curiosity, support, and broadcasting?

Before I could be associated with various institutions, I was more integrated into the networks linked to the Francophonie (whereas I was born in France and my white colleagues do not know these networks at all). I have nothing to reproach all the festivals and all those who work to ensure that these stories, these narratives related to the French languages (and the colonial history of France) can exist. Quite the contrary. But they lack the financial means. And here again, I speak of a hierarchy between important places that benefit from all the subsidies of the State and others (the disappearance of the French-language theatre, *Le Tarmac* testifies to this) who fight to make more voices of minorities heard often due to the country's colonial history.

This joins the question of languages and accents. It is very rare to hear foreign languages from outside Europe or languages from former colonies on stage. Yet, many of us have already seen interpreters in German or English with French subtitles. The same holds for accents. Often, when we hear them on stage, it is for the sake of humor. I've never heard a Guadeloupean or Alsatian accent on stage. There too, it contributes to the invisibility of stories, personal intimate experiences that are hierarchical and to which we refuse a form of universalism. Judging by the legitimated fiction, the universal is European, white, male, speaking an accent-free French, English or German. Sometimes in Quebecois. Apart from that, there is nothing left.

I remain convinced that all stories matter, that every experience deserves to be shared. If I could cry when Jane Eyre loses her best friend at the orphanage or she learns that Mister Rochester is already married in Charlotte Brontë's novel or the tragedy of *Phedre*, it seems to me that a person from a majority group could also project themselves into the story of a racialized young graduate wearing the veil without feeling her whiteness threatened. It is necessary and urgent to rebalance the place given to minority narratives to avoid hegemony and impoverishment in terms of content but also of form.

And when we try to overcome the various barriers that stand in our way, the questions of legitimacy, it is not always easy to be heard from where we stand. We face new challenges where doubt holds an important place. Between refusal and assignment, it is difficult to

find one's place. When a white man's text is rejected by a committee, he knows that the text did not please, or was not convincing enough. When you're a black woman, you never really know. My name being Penda Diouf, a name one can easily imagine coming from Black Africa (the sharpest ones will manage to recognize the name of either the Senegalese football player El Hadji or former president Abdou). I was accused of "not hearing the African pepper" in the text. In "The Grand Ourse"<sup>3</sup> (The Big Bear), evoking precisely these questions of broken threads due to exile and migration, I develop the character of a griot (a West African musician/storyteller) found in Europe, caught between the stakes of capitalism. A reading committee gave me their response by saying that griots do not exist in Europe. This simple example shows how vital it is that reading committees and institutions choosing texts can be sufficiently diversified so as not to exclude authors whose environment and background they do not understand. We write from ourselves, from what constitutes who we are with codes borrowed from other geographies, languages, cultural references, mythologies, aesthetics often unknown to predominantly white groups of reading committees. These dialogues are interesting because they open up new perspectives. Here again, we see a slow evolution in the creation of juries that are more inclusive. But how many texts that could have given us the opportunity to hear another vision of the world, to broaden our reflection, have remained in the desk drawer of the author, who perhaps since, has decided to quit writing.

<sup>3</sup> Penda Diouf, *La Grande Ourse*, éditions Quartett, 2021.

It is with this in mind that I created the "Jeunes textes en liberté" label, eight years ago with Anthony Thiabault. We were guided by Édouard Glissant and his saying "We will not transform the world if we do not transform the imaginary". Since 2015, accompanied by a reading committee that could also be described as "sensitivity readers", we have selected 39 texts, talking about today's world and its political issues: ecology, feminism, colonization, racism, migration, gender, working class neighborhoods and rural areas. It is also important for us that the people concerned feel empowered and legitimized to tell their story, their vision of the world, their prism, if they wish. Our reading committee is transparent: it is as diverse as possible, and the names are available on our site. We read the texts anonymously (to avoid projections on authors and focus on texts). We take care to remove texts carrying sexist, racist, homophobic, and ableist stereotypes... I hope that we are participating on our small scale to stimulate new vocations and to help the sense of legitimacy of emerging authors, especially from minority groups.

I was recently invited to the Royal Court in London for a two-week workshop based on one of my texts, "La Grande Ourse" (The Big Bear). I received this comment from a playwright of English/African descent: "The racial question is very subtle in your text". And she was absolutely right. I started writing the text in 2006 and at that time, I think I restrained myself strategically, so as not to "frighten" the reading committees with a too frontal approach to the racial issue. Today, I believe that society

has changed, that I have also found my way, but this sentence still resonates within me. I often wonder in what other places I had to limit myself out of fear that others would do it for me? And to what extent has this French environment been able to hold back my creativity in some places, when I see my peers in the United States or England addressing these issues in a much more serene and peaceful way?

I hope that one day these issues will stop agitating, weakening, and questioning us because they will have been resolved. This will also give to those of us concerned, time to write or create, for the sake of our profession. It has become by necessity our job to speak out (as I am doing today) to share one's story differently, to give the kind of expertise we are many to share. It is important that those concerned get to tell all of this, but to whom? Because they already know. Is it, to paraphrase the historian, Patrick Boucheron, "to look and confront the wound"? But we are already filled with this wound. So, these debates, these roundtables, are for whom? It is important that minority groups should be able to tell their stories. It is important that they take turns so they do not have to bear this mental load which can be that of representativeness. It is important that they can also forget who they are, and also sometimes rest. However, that too is a privilege.

Today more attention is being paid to women's writings or minority groups. And so much the better. But again, watch out for tokenistic attempts. It's easy to want to check all the boxes by inviting an artist from a minority

group to work. Yet, this can become a way of reproducing forms of domination (because this environment is very hierarchical) or creating abusive situations that will be difficult to renounce in view of the precariousness, fragility, and feeling of illegitimacy that one can still live. It is no longer possible to remain silent, (thanks to the #MeToo movement) and I hope that freedom of speech and its listening will allow us to clean up the ongoing and problematic practices of power issues. No one will accept to be the tree that hides the forest. Because the underground rhizome binds us.

I was also thinking about schools and theater conservatories. I had the great opportunity to participate in the jury of the Ecole du Nord (North of France drama school) in 2021. Almost 900 candidates, spread over three juries for about three weeks. I found the choice of texts very interesting and informative (90% of them were white male authors, some women authors, and almost no racialized authors...). But I was particularly surprised to see the number of rape scenes, violence against women acted out literally and with no political position towards what was presented on stage. That has also frightened me, because I would go home in the evening loaded with this condensed drama that was about killing or raping women. This theater exists and we are the heirs. But I think that there is an urgent need to broaden our research and get out of the patriarchy by proposing us women authors, other ways of seeing the world, naming and asking the essential questions of colonization (from one body to another, from man about nature, women, racialized people,

gender minorities, etc.) so that violence against women is something other than a scene chosen because it includes high-level acting.

Likewise, I am sincerely calling upon artists from minority groups to apply for directorships in different institutions. This is the opportunity to develop one's artistic vision, testing with more means, but also to accompany other artists of our rhizome in motion. I am often asked about these artists' positions: inside or outside institutions. I have no answer to that. I just think that everyone must act based on who they are, without having to justify oneself if they wish to work at the heart of the system or rather outside of it. The important thing is to be fully oneself, wherever one is.

Translated by Léa-Surya Diouf

Coda

How I overdosed  
on Artyzol\*:

a story of my  
life with cultural  
projects

*Katarzyna  
Renes*

"Artyzol is the creativity opiate secreted in the process of artistic circulation. Artyzol causes artists, curators or assistants to engage in art, even if their activity leads to poverty and frustration. Thanks to artyzol, the satisfaction of people in the arts (and, more broadly, of the projectariat) is no longer linked to remuneration or working conditions."<sup>1</sup>

The term defined by the Free University of Warsaw<sup>2</sup>, used by Kuba Szreder in his book *The ABC of the Projectariat*.

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1 Kuba Szreder, *ABC projektariatu. O nędzy projektowego życia*, Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2016.

2 As cited in Kuba Szreder: The Free University of Warsaw – a nomadic centre for interdisciplinary studies, critical insight, independent thinking about art and society, since 2009 co-created by Kuba Szreder, Jan Sowa, Joanna Figiel, Michał Kozłowski, Bogna Świątkowska and Szymon Żydek

My life is a cultural project.  
Projects are the cosmos.  
Projects are the past.  
Projects are the future.

Projects are the most important thing.  
The Art, Grant Art  
I laugh a bit at it; I struggle with it a bit.  
I'm very much in it.

I teach young people every day how important hygiene is – work-life balance, distance, respect, contracts. I encourage them to fight for themselves, to be assertive, to act on their own terms. I am even doing an international programme on it in collaboration with five European universities.  
It is a project.

I am also very much engaged in actions I take together with non-governmental cultural organisations. What do I do with them?

## **Projects**

I have fourteen years of experience as a project leader, coordinator, curator, head of production, expert, cultural manager. I have experienced all types of collaborations: both 'independent' and institutional. The collective ones, without a rigid hierarchy and based on the

classic master--subordinate power relationship. I know all the connotations. This is why I believe that something like independence in the cultural world does not exist.

Cultural projects connect me to people. This has been the label of most of my acquaintances over the last dozen years or so.

Professional, social, romantic. Every single one.  
For in the project, as in culture as a whole, we are one big family. A largely pathological one, about which more to come

## **Phase I of artyzol addiction**

It starts with an idea.

Someone wants to do something. There are different needs, among the most common ones I notice:

1. The need of the heart ("it has to happen!").
2. The economic need (for a large group, if not for the majority of project-makers, a project can be a tangible financial boost. I know people who live solely on projects – I myself lived like this for several years).
3. Development (thanks to projects we can realise ideas that go beyond the standards of institutions or commercial opportunities).
4. The need to make a name for oneself (everyone has an ego; everyone wants their idea to be realised).
5. The social need → if a project is successful, it is natural that social relationships are formed within it.

We start to like each other, we want to do more things together, we have more ideas.

## Phase II of artyzol addiction

What does it mean when the project is finishing? What does it mean if the project is “no more”?

What does it mean if we will not see each other again? What am I going to do right now?

And most importantly: WHAT ABOUT ART? What about our ideas? The second phase of the addiction is characterised by disagreement. Disapproval of the lack.

For the more susceptible ones, this lack can sometimes be cruelly acute. Emptiness comes to the fore. You start to unceasingly invent, search, talk, be and fight for opportunities.

In my case, this was characterised by:

- an increased need to participate in cultural life. Constant openings, premieres, concerts, author meetings
- intensive learning of the secrets of the specific field of art that is Grant Art<sup>3</sup>, in which I specialised
- more and more projects that I wanted to realise. It was not just out of my own need and idea → a circulation came in this phase: someone recommended me to someone else, someone told

<sup>3</sup> The term created by Janek Sowa and meaning activities motivated by the availability of grants, rather than by real artistic needs → Jan Sowa, *Goldex Poldex Madafaka, or the Report From the (Besieged) Pi Sector*, in: *The European Cultural Politics 2015. The Report on the Future of Public Financing of Contemporary Art in Europe*, ed. by Maria Lind, Raid Minichbauer, Warsaw 2009.

someone else about me. I started doing so-called external projects. I was coordinating someone else's ideas, producing things that I would not normally take on, but which brought me tangible financial returns. Some of these things were successful, some not at all. The most important stage of this phase was satisfaction, which began to be a huge driver of my work. But also the pain of failure if something did not work out. I also began to collaborate with artists whose art simply fascinated me.

## Phase III of Artyzol addiction

This phase is characterised by identification and responsibility. You already see the negative effects of the addiction:

"I cannot do it, I have a project" – the answer to everything

"No way in November, that is when the grants are" – zero private life

"We have to come up with something better; this idea is too weak for this competition. But we have to submit something anyway" – grantosis

The life calendar begins to depend on deadlines, milestones and launches. You stop being there, stop socialising, doing anything else because your projects require con-

stant presence. At least you think they do. And even if you think it may be just an illusion, eventually you see it is not.

At this stage of my addiction I happened to:

- conduct rehearsals for the director (he disappeared suddenly for few weeks with no sign of life, the actors directed the rehearsals themselves)
- leave a 6-week-old baby and fly abroad overnight to save one of my projects
- have a car accident that ended with a right-off, because after returning from one project, and still having jet lag, I was driving to a concert within another one
- search through foreign hospitals at night for one of my closest co-workers, who disappeared unexpectedly, along with the money

That is when I sobered up for the first time. My family and friends were horrified. The co-worker had found himself, boozed-up. This was a few days before an important premiere. Coming to my senses came drastically and unexpectedly. For the first time in my life I decided to find myself a normal, full-time, institutional job. Luckily I have managed to.

### **Phase IV of Artyzol addiction**

I stayed with only those projects which felt safe, and which didn't force me to do everything myself.

I guarded my boundaries firmly, I sensitised my colleagues that I would be halting my project activities.

Or maybe I didn't have to? Somehow I reconciled all this after all. I adopted the principle that I only do:

- what I believe in
- with people I trust
- in teams where I don't feel indispensable.

Artyzol does not only cause euphoria that accompanies the production of art. It also gives a feeling of changing reality. A sense of agency. A possibility of making a statement. It fuels the energy to act.

My projects created in this phase were meant to be the result of a group effort, a response to the surrounding crises, an example of collective action.

Brave new world.<sup>4</sup>

I knew that I had an addictive tendency. That if I got carried away by an idea, a performance, a cause – I would devote myself to it wholeheartedly, forgetting about everything else. I planned to finish things with friends and focus only on what I genuinely co-created, what developed me and really interested me.

But I never did. Despite numerous attempts, I was constantly in the loop, proposing other things, taking responsibility for cases I shouldn't have done. I kept silent when others screwed up. This, by the way, is characteristic of addictions. You already know that the addiction does not serve you, but you still do not want to

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<sup>4</sup> The title of a cult novel by Aldous Huxley, in which characters, on a massive scale, get intoxicated with soma – a drug inducing happiness and oblivion.

stop. A trait of the most persistent ones is to undergo frequent and voluntary treatment. That is me too. My “parallel worlds” became essential for any activity. I had to cut myself off completely more and more often, otherwise I was unable not to deal with the culture. To sober up for a while, just to be able to get even higher and for longer. These were not micro doses.

### **Political background**

I realise that the situation of drug addicts is completely different, and I do not claim to be in the same position. However, I want to show the logics and mechanisms that are similar in both cases, which also stem from the same root: the inability to deal with emotions.

The precarious character of cultural reality entails the uncertainty of tomorrow. None of us knows whether we will be among the winners of a grant competition. The opportunities for obtaining public funds in Poland are diminishing year by year. Even if, in theory, there is the same amount of them, belief in any transparency or concern for artistic quality in the programmes of the Ministry of Culture has long been abandoned.

Recently, a US report on the subject has been published. A large part of “Cultural Control. Censorship and Suppression of the Arts in Poland”<sup>5</sup> is devoted to self-censorship, to which artists submit in order to still be able to do something, anything.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/projects/artistic-freedom-monitor/poland/>

After all, it is enough to look at a random list of the beneficiaries of grants from the Ministry of Culture, to come up with an assumption bordering on certainty that pluralism in art, the quality of performance and originality of ideas are not necessarily the policies guiding various commissions. Witold Mrozek, in his text for the *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper “Fellow Kin. This is how the Gliński’s people distributed the money for art” from May 2022, writes about the division in the “visual arts” competition, in which the money was allocated only by the minister’s close friends. They could also count on support. Nobody cared for appearances or justification for the choice of the committee members. This is our Polish reality. And yet we were happy when we recently found out that the former president of the Polish Television, famous for his adoration of disco polo, would not become the new Minister of Culture, at least for the time being.

This is the background to our activities. The public money is almost non-existent, or it is there under the conditions of: sitting quietly, not supporting women’s rights, forgetting about equality or at least pretending not to have any views. Taking photos with the minister when necessary. And of course, the subjects must conform – preferably great Poles, better still nationalists from the list officially approved by the government. Even Mickiewicz can be controversial. The director of the Słowacki Theatre in Krakow found this out after he had staged an outstanding production by Maja Kleczewska, where the lead role was performed by a woman. A Polish hero without

a penis? This is something Polish culture is not going to accept. Lesser Poland's Superintendent of Education Barbara Nowak demanded that *Dziady* ("Forefather's Eve") be removed from the stage, without even watching it. To illustrate the oddity of this appeal, I would like to add that the playwright did not change a single word in the original text.

Linguistically pure Mickiewicz, the most important Polish bard. In May, the Marshal of Lesser Poland announced the dismissal of the theatre director Krzysztof Głuchowski.

As you can see, you have to try really hard to get Artyzol now.

### **Educational and cultural background**

Another aspect of this context is our work culture. Recently, a university I am associated with published a sociological report entitled. *(Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations. A survey on abuse and discrimination in the community of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw*<sup>6</sup>. It is the first sociological study on such a scale in Poland, maybe even in the world. Its aim was to conduct an in-depth diagnosis of the violence, discrimination and transgressive behaviour taking place in the teaching process; to identify the scale of undesirable actions; to pinpoint and explain their sources

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kubisa, Mikołaj Lewicki, Justyna Kościńska, Katarzyna Rakowska, Feliks Tuszko, *The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations. A survey on abuse and discrimination in the community of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw*, 2022; <https://akademia.at.edu.pl/raport-niezgoda-na-przekraczanie-granic/>

at the individual level and at the level of organisational culture; and, finally, to give recommendations for change.

One of the main insights is a phrase that, in my view, very aptly describes our work culture as an "ethos of effort and sacrifice". This is the sweatshop culture that both Donald Trump and famous Polish journalist Tomasz Lis (the latter being recently accused of bullying) have boasted about. One of the main underpinnings of neoliberalism: the popularisation of a commercial system of action in which, at the level of ideology, everything depends on the individual's determination and commitment. The ethic of success. The belief is that only hard, titanic and excessive work will lead to the top and that it is morally justifiable to achieve success in all possible ways. This is what meritocracy is all about: the system of social hierarchy, in which not only one's position but also one's social standing is determined by competence and merit. We are all brought up in this. This is how we are educated. This is what we want to believe in.

The pandemic brutally exposed the flaws of this thinking. It quickly became apparent that the lack of any social provision for multitudes belonging to the precariat and cultural projectariat could result in their complete non-existence. Many people, especially those from the so-called "dark matter" of culture, .e.g., managers, sound directors, lighting designers, producers, said goodbye to culture once and for all at that time. This was due not only to a lack of financial backing and the necessity to earn money in other sectors, but also to the complete invisibility of these people. This was not even so much

a disappearance, as a permanent absence from the view dominated by artists and executives blatant enough to boast about themselves. I'm saying it ironically, because I myself started an increased social-media activity at the time. This stemmed not so much from a need for social prominence (although I make no secret of it – it did, too), as from a fear of being out of the loop, which is the highest form of cultural exclusion. The pathology of the projectariat is that the fruit of a group effort, such as a project, is very often recognized as the work belonging only to artists who want to take all the credit. I mean the so called collective situations.

This is partly dictated by the marketing reality (projects are “sold” with images: artists and experts), but can be unfair and simply painful, especially in cases when you have devoted a huge amount of your own commitment, competence and time.

I have been experiencing this very tangibly recently. A form of punishing me for expressing non-wanted opinion through a fellow artist is to consistently exclude my name from things we were doing together. This is a popular and effective tool of oppression. And a one-sided one. I cannot allow myself to do it, because an event will not be promoted without mentioning the performer. He can dispose of his benignity according to his mood. We can also quarrel in the media, which will negatively affect the image of both of us as well as of the project – a seemingly common good.

I am also aware of the fact that I am making this statement in public only because I can allow myself to do

so. I am privileged enough to talk about the pathology of the system without fearing for my immediate future. This is due not only to my permanent employment with (I must add) a very progressive employer, but above all to my social position: I come from a family with a high cultural background, I have a partner who earns income in a different sector as well as helping with childcare, while I am involved in culture. I do not want to diminish my own merits here: I have won myself the place I am in by achieving mastery in self-exploitation. I did not run marathons or editorial board meetings while having a strokelike a famous Polish journalist, but I worked very hard to get here. I must stress, however, that without ordinary, and so rarely appreciated luck, I could be quite somewhere else today.

It is also worth noting that the need for self-exploitation (a.k.a. the ethos of effort and sacrifice) does not only result from the brutality of the market, the reality of the projectariat or the need of being part of cultural circulation. This is also the domain of people from Central and Eastern Europe, where I come from.

Due to the economic and political situation as well as social reality, we must work much harder to be heard, compared to the West. To have something to say. We don't believe in any causality – decisions are made in Brussels, Berlin, and London. We have our own little inflationary hellhole, with gradually reduced women's rights, no LGBTQ+ rights, with the Catholic church dictating all the rules and Vladimir Putin around the corner. Getting out of this circle inevitably takes increased effort and determination.

Recently, I have been working a lot with the Benelux countries. The difference in our approach to culture work is huge. My colleagues cannot even fathom what it means to have several big projects a year, a permanent job and a small child. For them, a break is sacred; I have to have a reminder on my phone that I should have a drink of water. I am not saying this pejoratively to boast about what a bloody kick-ass Madafaka I am. On the contrary: I envy them. I too would like to have a normal break and not have to constantly toil to make an, often unmentioned, name for myself for economic, common and, above all, anxiety reasons.

The basis of my self-exploitation is anxiety. This also connects me to addicts who get high to drown out difficult emotions. I realise that in the brutal world of success, I am what my latest projects are. The political situation I live in means that I have no certainty that tomorrow night, with a hastily drafted bill, my university will not be transformed into an outpost of any party with authoritarian tendencies. This is what happened to the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest, which was stripped of its autonomy by Orban. The great Victor, against all previous rules, simply changed the status, installed his rector there and got rid of all the people inconvenient to power. And what? Nothing. Shit happens.

## Over-responsibility

The ethos of effort and sacrifice or more broadly – meritocratic society, tells us that success is the sum of an individual's efforts. According to this logic, failure is solely our own fault. Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit*<sup>7</sup>, writes that the rhetoric of equality is based on the slogan that anyone who works hard and follows the rules “will get as far as their talent takes them”. In the world of cultural projects, this talent is very specifically measured: the number of audiences at events, the number of media mentions, the number of artists invited and many other tabulated metrics. Such a concept reduces talent to merely an indicator.

"You will only get as far as the indicator takes you", this is our reality.

Such a system gives no room for making mistakes. Just like the traditional model of teaching in art education, where, in the most extreme version of the “method”, the student is supposed to be a copy of the master. In general, we should be ashamed of mistakes. We, art workers, live in an environment where every action is exposed to public evaluation and comment. What matters is the effect. This is the only thing we are held accountable for. We talk a lot about process, about collectivity, about trust and many other beautiful things, but we are not able to talk to each other for real. Everyone is supposed to be a superhero – or a professional as isolated as a cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, PWN 2020

manager, who usually works alone, this is the best route to depression – a dear friend of mine.

Franco "Bifo" Berardi talks about depression as a "pathology of responsibility"<sup>8</sup>, diagnosing it as an occupational disease of the precariat. He repeats after Spinoza that "what the body can do, that is its soul". In working on projects, a sense of responsibility is essential for any action. I have already talked about indicators and political realities. So it is easy to guess that doing anything meaningful, reasonably independent and ambitious in today's Poland as well as in many other countries, such as Hungary, practically borders on the miraculous. Today, the projectariat is standing on its head in a space that is continuously changing. It is no wonder that those who manage to do at least something feel like the chosen ones, into whose hands the fate of independent culture has been entrusted. This is how I feel.

The current crises are not only increasing the responsibility of the "chosen" organisation and the sum of its members for the funds entrusted to it. The sum of the members? Let's dwell on this for a moment.

My experience makes me put forward the following thesis: in "collective" situations the same people always do everything. This applies just as much to grassroots cultural projects as well as any form of activism I have experienced. The same people wash the dishes after a shared lunch. The same people make coffee. The same people participate in protests and marches. The

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<sup>8</sup> I have learnt about Franco and the above diagnosis from the book by Kuba Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat* → Franco Bifo Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Los Angeles 2009

same people engage in activism. The same people take responsibility for project activities. The same people are taking any responsibility for anything at all. The same people get depressed.

It always starts the same way too. A spark. It may be an idea, perhaps the need to protest or collective aid, which Poland has specialised in when faced with the necessity to support its Ukrainian neighbours. The basis is also always the same: the state does not and will not act. We no longer have any illusions. We have to do it ourselves.

Then, there is the division of roles or functions, if you prefer. I have this competence, you have that. I am also talking here about cultural patho-institutions, in which people decide to act without any guarantee of remuneration or security whatsoever. That has been my most common project experience over the last dozen years or so. Nobody here employs you. The fact that someone decides to do anything in such a situation is purely and simply an act of goodwill. Please remember this. We do not have a hierarchical management system. No governance at all. This is a clan. A conglomerate. A bottom-up cultural or social initiative. But at this stage, with such principles ("if it works out, we'll think about it"), it is certainly not an employment relationship.

This is the enthusiasm stage. Artyzol floats in the air. I used to think that it was only typical of Poland, but now I know it is the case in many other countries. I do not deny such activity. Without these drugs, rapport and the will to act together, many of the most beautiful initi-

atives would not have come into being. This is valuable. I intend to keep doing drugs.

In the cultural projectariat we mostly do not have an organised working situation. We organise ourselves. We sit in cafés, houses and parks or in someone else's space. We walk the dog. This is what our offices look like. That is when you usually see different levels of involvement. Someone brings cakes, someone cleans the table. And someone else forgets that they were supposed to show up.

The moment we decide to move on with a project, we should sign a contract. Carefully divide the responsibilities. And stick to it firmly. Though honestly, I do not know if that may do any good. I no longer have any idea what to do in a situation where all the action is based on a person or a group of people, who show enough responsibility to save things notoriously ignored by others. Of course reason tells me: don't do it. Don't get involved, don't patch up the holes, don't take responsibility for it, let the thing, or the world, burn. Say "shit happens" and have a drink. This is the only way out.

The ethos of effort and sacrifice that is our all-pervading reality causes not only the psycho-physical losses of individuals exposing themselves to self-exploitation. To paraphrase Kubisa and Lewicki: it causes tensions in relationships and generates frustrations. It fosters a loss of self-esteem, providing a foothold for violent behaviour, as exhaustion reduces the possibilities for cooperation and the creation of shared meanings. Instead, there is frustration experienced as individual weakness or as other people's responsibility.

Where is the common good here? Where is the collectivity here? Where is the collectivity that we like to boast about so much? Nowhere. And it has no right to be. Until we change the system so that it does not exploit the most susceptible ("addicted") individuals, (and there will always be some) all the slogans about cooperation will be just empty platitudes.

It is not shameful to be responsible. It is not shameful to be creative. It is not shameful to get involved. Shame is not being sincere and honest. Shame is not to redefine your views. Shame is not expanding one's knowledge. Shame is not being conscientious. Shame is not being industrious. Shame is not trying.

Shame is ignoring. Shame is benefiting from the work of others without recognising their contribution. Shame is not recognising one's privilege. Shame is dishonesty. Shame is shoddiness. Shame is the mindless promotion of the culture of the fuck-up. Shame is the cultivation of idiotic divisions between artists – the God's anointed ones – and inferior art workers. Shame is the lack of compassion. Shame is mockery. It is shameful to force, through one's actions, those particularly vulnerable to self-exploitation to continue to do so.

Equally, however, these 'vulnerable' individuals, saving the world for others, need to work on their own change. It is not just the system that is up for improvement. All our individual actions contribute to supporting the image of the projectariat that I outline above. Every decision to do a job for another person, every unsaid act of exploitation, every fake smile, every unsigned document,

every forgetting of the self at the expense of others is as harmful as ignorance and laziness.

Some time someone said that I was "playing the heroine". I am not playing her. I am her. And now I cease to be her. Because it is wrong. It is not good for me. It is destroying me.

I no longer promise myself that I will not do any more projects. I know I will. Because I want to, because I like to, because I can.

I intend to do my drug smarter instead. No more "we'll do it somehow". This "somehow" I am now establishing already at the starting level. With different scenarios. I have allowed myself to let go of a few things. And you know what happened? Nothing. And nothing will happen at all. Tough luck. We will survive. Or not, but it will not be my responsibility.

We desperately need to get back to basics. To establish principles. A vision, a mission, a dialogue. A conversation about SENSE. To reflect on what we are here for. To stop shouting at each other. To abandon complacency and the perpetual contest of egos in favour of laying the foundations of a new culture: one that does not meet the needs of successive founders and indicators, but addresses a changing society. One that responds to the climate, economic, war, culture, identity and solidarity crisis. One that goes beyond our innate tendency to extend the field. Revisits our activities to date. Treats failure as a natural part of the process. Filled with content. Rejects privilege-based merit as the foundation of justice. Returns to values as a

guiding principle. Ensuring equality for all its co-creators, while taking responsibility for functions.

To do this, however, we must start with ourselves. Take care of our own needs, boundaries and health. Draw our own red line and not cross it. Sit down at the table, rather than wait for someone to bring us the chair. Demand the fulfilment of responsibilities – from institutions of state and other people. Speak about ourselves. Learn to let go.

Fixing the world heroically, based on an individual effort is not beautiful at all.

Do you know what it looks like instead? Asocial and non-didactic. Creating an illusory sense of control. Maintaining the status quo. Being just as toxic as the blowhard boomerism we are fighting.

Translated by Monika Kiliás

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# Contributor biographies

Szymon Adamczak is a theatre practitioner, artistic researcher, queer dramaturg and HIV activist working across disciplines. Studied liberal arts at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and completed a master at DAS Theatre. Through his performative work, Szymon weaves poetic imagination, visual sensitivity and socially aware actions taking place onstage and in the public realm. With a background in organizing and programming in the arts, Szymon has been interested in the proximity of artistic practice and civic engagement. He has been working as a dramaturg of National Stary Theatre in Kraków and STUDIO theatregallery in Warsaw. In recent years Szymon has co-created a number of transformative and empowering projects with and for LGBTQ+ communities in Poland and run a transdisciplinary research platform “Polish EIDS”. Szymon is a Fellow on the THIRD program in the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD), Amsterdam. Together with Elio Steffen he founded and leads the education and research project *In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities – Queer Performance Pedagogy and Feedback* (IPOP).

Agata Adamięcka-Sitek is a lecturer and Student Ombuds-person at The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. She works on issues of gender, corporeality, politics of art

and institutional criticism. For many years she headed the Research and Publishing Department at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute.

Member of the curatorial team of the Forum for the Future of Culture in Warsaw and the team that coordinated the development of the current cultural policy of Warsaw. A member, along with Monika Strzępka, Monika Dziekan, Dorota Kowalkowska and Małgorzata Błasińska, of the Dramatyczny Kolektyw, with which she runs Teatr Dramatyczny im. Gustawa Holoubka in Warsaw, transforming it into a feminist cultural institution.

For many years she collaborated as a dramaturg with Marta Górnicka, developing THE CHORUS OF WOMEN and the Political Voice Institute at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin.

aster arribas is a movement artist and researcher who approaches art-making through the creation of (un)learning techniques and the facilitation of spaces of relation. Their work dances in between questions of embodiment and bodying, the interplay of creation with auto-theory, and the advancement of a neurodiversity paradigm through creative practices. They also have a strong focus on sexuality and the power of pleasure as a living force. Together with antje nestel, aster co-created *shy\* play*, a platform focused on doing neurodiversity as a relational practice in difference.

This approach challenges the logic of normality and neurotypicality, striving to create ever-shifting forms of sociality. *shy\* play* is also a project hosted by DAS Research.

As a teacher-researcher at the Academy of Theater and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam, aster is part of the Embodied Knowledge Research Group and was awarded the ATD Teacher-Researcher Fellowship 2023-24 for their project *Neurodiversity as Relation in Arts Education* in collaboration with antje nestel and their platform *shy\* play*.

Marine Bachelot-Nguyen is an author and director, member of the Lumière d'août collective (Rennes). In her work she explores the alliance of fiction and document, the intersections of the body and politics, feminist and postcolonial issues, social and intimate genealogies.

Her work includes *Histoires de femmes et de lessives*, *À la racine*, *La place du chien*, *Les ombres et les lèvres (Viêtnam LGBT)*. And more recently: *Circulations Capitales* (family memories of France-Vietnam-Russia), *Akila le tissu d'Antigone*, a transposition of the myth of Antigone in post-attack France, as well as the reading-show *Soeurs*. Other of his texts have been directed by David Gauchard, Anne Bisang, Alexandre Koutchevsky, Hélène Soulié...

Her play *Le fils* received the Sony Labou Tansi and Primeurs 2019 awards. Her texts are pub-

lished by Lansman, and short plays by Théâtrales, l'Avant-Scène, Les Solitaires intempestifs. She is a founding member of the collectives HF Bretagne and Décoloniser les arts.

Julia Bee (she/her) is media and cultural studies scholar, professor of media aesthetics at the University of Siegen, previously 2016-2022 assistant professor (Juniorprofessor) at Bauhaus-University Weimar, visiting professor at Frei Universität Berlin and University of Vienna and Post-Doc at University Konstanz. Current areas of work are ethnographic film and visual methods; gender, affect and media; decolonial and media studies approaches to climate catastrophe; bicycle media, mobility justice.

In 2020 she co-founded the platform nocturne (with Gerko Egert). They publish on experimental knowledge production and organize events of radical pedagogy across art, academia, and activism. [www.nocturne-plattform.de](http://www.nocturne-plattform.de)

Julia Biesiada is a film and theatre actress. She earned her degree from The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw in 2022, specializing in the Acting Department. She has performed in various productions, including the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska.

Julia Borkowska is a The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw graduate. Before studying acting, she studied Cultural Studies at IKP at the UW and puppetry at PWST in Wrocław. She played in *Śmieszne miłościach* (dir. A. Sajnuk), *Pif paf* (dir. K. Kirsz), *Fressen* (dir. K. Kozyra) and musical performances *Kilka monologów i piosenek na podstawie czterech cytatów* (dir. S. Narloch) and *Ants* created as part of PPA in Wrocław (dir. A. Tabisz). She was also part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika SzczaWińska. On a daily basis, she works with voice as a dubbing actress and audio book reader. She also loves working with her body and regularly participates in creating recordings using the motion capture technique. If she wasn't an actress, she would become a professional herbalist with her own studio in the woods, because, as she admits, she has grown tired of the city and enjoys getting away from civilization every now and then. She loves silence, cares for conscious breathing and good contact with herself. She dreams of someday having a house with a large orchard, growing her own tomatoes and living a simple life.

Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca

Professor Dr. Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca is the Lector and Head of DAS Graduate School at Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University of the Arts in the Netherlands. Her current research includes the project, *Performance Philosophy & Animals: Towards a Radical Equality* – a long-term project that asks how performance can contribute to more ethical ways of knowing non-human animals in the entangled contexts of the climate crisis and social inequality. Her forthcoming publications include *Interspecies Performance* (2023) co-edited with Florence Fitzgerald-Allsopp for Performance Research books. Previous books by Cull Ó Maoilearca are *Deleuze and Performance* (2009); *Theatres of Immanence* (2012); *Encounters in Performance Philosophy* (2014) and *The Routledge Companion to Performance Philosophy* (2020). She is also a core convener of the Performance Philosophy network and co-editor of its journal and book series.

Penda Diouf writes for the performing arts (theatre, opera, music and dance).

Her plays, published by Quartett, have been translated into German, English, Armenian, Czech and Finnish and have won awards. She also runs writing workshops at the Maison des Femmes in Saint-Denis as part of the “Ecrivain

en Seine Saint Denis” scheme, at the MC93 and with the Auditorium Theatre in Poitiers.

She is also co-founder, with Anthony Thibault, of the label Jeunes textes en liberté, which aims to support contemporary theatre writers and promote a better diversity of narration and representation on the theatre stage.

Gerko Egert (he/him) is a performance and media studies scholar. He is Privatdozent at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies, Justus-Liebig-University, Giessen. His research deals with experimental pedagogies and self-organized learning, philosophies and politics of movement, dance and performance in the anthropocene, process philosophy and (speculative) pragmatism. His Dissertation deals with the notion of touch in contemporary dance (published 2016 [Transcript Verlag], English translation 2020 [Routledge]). More information on: [www.gerkoegert.com](http://www.gerkoegert.com)  
In 2020 he co-founded the platform nocturne (with Julia Bee). They publish on experimental knowledge production and organize events of radical pedagogy across art, academia, and activism. [www.nocturne-plattform.de](http://www.nocturne-plattform.de).

Carly Everaert is a costume scenographer. Recent projects include the costume design for the *Trojan Wars and Queer Planet* at HNT-jong and in collaboration with Liesbeth Coltof Hoffen und *Sehnen*

and *Miroloi* in Bochum and Berlin. *Miroloi* received der Faust for best youth theater direction in Germany last season. Carly received the Proscenium Prize for their entire oeuvre in 2022. As a teacher-researcher at the scenography department of the Academy of Theater and Dance in Amsterdam, Carly is a member of the Embodied Knowledge research group at the same ATD where they research questions of costume, space and embodiment from an intersectional, practice-oriented perspective. Carly received a research fellowship for the year 2022-23 by the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance with which various existing collaborations are being supported and developed further. With Mira Thompson, they initiated the research project *Interdependence: On disability justice and the (performing) arts* where open-source teaching material is created on Disability Justice in art practices. With Selm Merel Wenselaers (as a follow-up to the Lieve Inclusieve letters in the Theaterkrant ) they shared the curatorship of Shebang Issue 3 exploring the importance of a Trans-gaze on and in performance. From February to October 2023, a taped conversation between Mary Evans and Carly Everaert is part of Evans’ exhibition Gilt at Zeitz MOCAA, exploring the colonial histories of their two countries in both of their practices.

Agnieszka Jakimiak is theatre director and playwright, doctoral student at the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, graduate of the Individual Studies in the Humanities Department at the Warsaw University and the Directing Department at the Theatre School in Krakow. Her current research is focused on traces of censorship and self-censorship within the realm of theatre and performing arts. Her work combines self-referential analysis and institutional critique and remains focused on interrogating forms of distribution of power and challenging hegemonic practices in theatre. She has directed plays at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw: *Fear Eats the Soul* (2017) based on a script by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and *Still Life* (2020) based on a script written by her main collaborator Mateusz Atman. Together with Goran Injac and Joanna Wichowska, she worked as a dramaturge with Oliver Frljić on *Un-Divine Comedy. The Remains*, *Un-Divine Comedy. Confession* and *The Curse*. She has published in *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, *Didaskalia*, *Dialog* and *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Her most recent productions, co-created with Mateusz Atman, are: *Miła robótka* (*Pleasant Job*) – a performance on the beginnings of Polish pornography, *Chamstwo* (*Bastardy*) on the roots of Polish patriarchy, *Seks, praca i marzenia* (*Sex, Work and Dreams*) on the alliance between sex

work and theatre work and *Mój pierwszy rave* (*My First Rave*) about the communal aspect of techno culture in Poland in the 90s.

Hilary Jones has been a member of ‘The Centre for Voice in Performance’ at The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland since 1996, having previously taught at a number of leading UK drama schools. Her international profile includes training for The Singapore Broadcasting Company, masterclasses for Flinders University and the Sydney Conservatoire in Australia, visiting Voice Professor at The Academy of Film and Theatre in Bucharest, voice coach for the award-winning Teatro Biuro Podrozy in Poland and master practitioner sessions for Yell Studios in Atlanta. Closer to home, she has coached on productions for The National Theatre of Scotland, The Royal Court and BBC Radio Scotland. Her work in TV includes the series ‘Lip Service’ for Kudos (BBC3) ‘Case Histories’ (BBC1) and ‘Waterloo Road’ (BBC1) and films ‘You Instead’ for Sigma, Bollywood’s ‘Shamshera’ (2022) ‘Sweetly It Turns’ with Ruth Sheen and Richard Wilson and ‘Girl’ directed by Adura Onashile which opened the 2023 Glasgow Film Festival. Hilary was also dialect coach on ‘The Wife’ for which Glenn Close won a Golden Globe in 2019. More recently she has been working on an HBO Max blockbuster and an upcoming BBC TV series set in Northern Ireland.

Her academic profile encompasses a particular research interest in 'Performance Stress' interrogating the relationship between neuroscience and the voice. She was a founding member of ISSTIP, acted in an advisory capacity for the British Association of Performing Arts Medicine and was a member of the British Voice Associations Education working party.

A highly experienced Presentational Skills trainer Hilary has run numerous courses in creative communication for clients as diverse as KPMG, NHS Managers, Housing Options Scotland, Inclusion Scotland, Amazon, Strathclyde's Legal Department, and Stirling University.

Since 2019 she has been part of the Erasmus: Change-Now! project with a specific focus on the rise of Intimacy Co-ordination and its impact on the industry.

Monika Kwaśniewska (she/her) (Jagiellonian University in Kraków)

Assistant Professor at the Department of Theatre and Drama of the Jagiellonian University. Editor of „Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna”. Author of books *Od wstrętu do sublimacji. Teatr Krzysztofa Warlikowskiego w świetle teorii Julii Kristevej* (2009), *Pytanie o wspólnotę. Jerzy Grzegorzewski i Jan Klata* (2016) and *Między hierarchią a anarchią. Teatr – Instytucja – Krytyka* (2019). Co-editor (together with Grzegorz

Niziołek) of the books *Zła pamięć. Przeciwhistoria w polskim teatrze i dramacie* (2012) and (together with Katarzyna Waligóra) *Teatr brzydkich uczuć* (2021). Currently, she is involved in the #MeToo movement in theatre and institutional criticism.

ORCID

Maria Kozłowska is a film and theatre actress. She earned her degree from The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw in 2022, specializing in the Acting Department. She has performed in various productions, including the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska.

Katarzyna Lis is a film and theatre actress. Born and raised in South Poland. Graduated from the National Academy of Dramatic Arts in Warsaw. Recently, have been a member of an ensemble at the Aleksander Fredro Theater in Gniezno, Poland. She was also part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska. Constantly misses her family and friends.

Adrianna Malecka (1995) is stage and film actress, The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw graduate (2022), studied in Łódź Film School (2014-15). She played parts of Antigone in diploma performance *Antigone*.

*Oedipus*, Rena in *Stramers* and co-wrote her part in *Club* (dir. W. Szczawińska, co-produced by TR Warszawa). On 39<sup>th</sup> Festival of Academic Theatre she won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize for Best Role (for roles of Antigone and Rena) and Critic's Choice Award "Golden Razor". Since 2021 she's part of Zagłębie Theatre's ensemble. Aside of theatre, she starred in main roles in numerous short films, music videos and episodic roles in cinematic productions. She cooperates with Theatre Academy in Warsaw as an assistant tutor in numerous classes. She is also developing as a screenwriter and a director, also starting work on her own performances. [adriannamalecka.com](http://adriannamalecka.com)

Bojana Mladenović is artistic director of SNDO – School for New Dance Development, choreography Bachelor at the Amsterdam University of the Arts. She graduated from DasArts (now DAS Theater), a postgraduate program in contemporary performing arts in Amsterdam. After studies, her works were produced at the Frascati Theater in Amsterdam and featured at the Something Raw Festival, Beursschouwburg in Brussels and Xing in Bologna. From 2010-2014, Bojana was the artistic director of Het Veem Theater, highlighting the work of a new generation of artists in the field of choreography, performance and experimental performing arts. Bojana was born in Belgrade, where she

lived and worked as choreographer and performer, and where she was one of the founders of Station – Service for Contemporary Dance, Nomad Dance Academy and Druga Scena. Bojana is a two-time laureate of the Festival of Choreographic Short-form in Belgrade and her choreographies were performed in the National Theater, KPGT, Bitef Theater and the Little Theater Duško Radović. She cherishes her background as a member of Belgrade's independent dance and performing arts scene in the nineties and early two-thousands as this created the foundation for all her artistic, curatorial and socially engaged work onwards. Since 2006 Bojana lives and works in Amsterdam where she initiated and co-curated programs such as Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education – A Week with Angela Davis, BER-AMS-BXL and the online mapping of the performance field tool, the Performance Platform.

antje nestel (they/them) is a teacher, a neurodivergent/neurodiverse bodymind, a partner, a companion to their cat, and a facilitator of participatory events, which they sometimes refer to as art or learning as the accommodation of difference. Together with aster arribas, they have created a platform that invents with neurodiversity. This platform, currently named *shy\*play*, focuses on exploring neurodiversity not as a process of ex-

planation, but as a relational practice in difference. Through *shy\* play*, antje is interested in resisting the pathology paradigm that characterizes neurodiverse bodyminds as disordered. They are rethinkingdoing with neurodiversity to create different neurodiverse ways of living in mutual support.

Katarzyna Renes is a cultural manager, artworker. Since 2019 she works at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, where she heads the international department. Together with Agata Adamiecka, she leads the “CHANGE-NOW!” program developing new proposals for cultural education and practice in five European countries. Co-implementer of the program “Safe Space. Good practices and tools for the transformation of theater education”. Associated with the Kwadrofonik and Kwartesencja Associations.

She also works as an independent producer and curator. She has led cultural projects in most countries of the European Union, in the East (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus) and in the United States. An author of a number of artistic and educational programs at home and abroad (including “Big dog doesn’t bark” realized with Comedy Club and Pogodno Ensemble). She works with theater and visual artists, comedians, musicians and filmmakers.

In 2013-2018 she co-directed the International Festival “Discovering Paderewski” in Lviv. She produced several artistic events in Ukraine with the participation of Krzysztof Penderecki, Jerzy Maksymiuk and many others.

From 2010 to 2016 she was associated with the Villa Decius Association in Krakow, where she led f.e. Visegrad Academy of Cultural Management (VACuM) and many other initiatives. In 2012-2013, she was responsible for taking care of refugee writers (Marie Amelie, Kareem Amer) in cooperation with ICORN – International Cities of Refuge Network.

She was awarded a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture in the field of cultural management (2015). She holds European Diploma of Cultural Management under the auspices of the Council of Europe (2018). Member of the Board of Oracle Cultural Management Network (since 2019). Author of publications about the process of work in cultural field (in Polish and English). Leading lectures and workshops for international groups of students and professionals she’s focusing on social, economic and philosophical aspects of cultural transformation.

Rajni Shah is an artist whose practice is focused on listening and gathering as creative and political acts. They have been making performances since 1999. Rajni’s first monograph, titled *Experi-*

*ments in Listening*, was published in June 2021, and in September 2021 they published a series of accompanying zines, available to download and print at home. Rajni is currently a tutor on the THIRD program and a researcher in the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam.

Magdalena Sildatk is a The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw graduate. She was part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska. Her big acting dream is to fight with a two-handed sword. She loves horses, fantasy, and Kashubia. Her surname comes from the German word ‘der Soldat’ – soldier. She has many Kashubian songs in my repertoire, and she also enjoys dancing the kosedera.

Joy Mariama Smith (1976, United States) is an installation and movement artist, activist, educator, and architectural designer. Rooted in socially engaged art practice, Joy Mariama Smith’s work primarily addresses the conundrum of projected identities in various contexts. A sub-theme, or ongoing question in their work is: What is the interplay between the body and its physical environment? They studied at the Dutch Art Institute in Arnhem; the NewSchool of Architecture & Design in San Diego; L’École Interna-

tionale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris; and Oberlin College in Ohio. Their work has been performed internationally, including at If I Can’t Dance Edition VI – Event and Duration, Amsterdam; SoLow Festival, Philadelphia; Freedom of Movement, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam; Oude Kerk, Amsterdam; and Ponderosa Movement & Discovery in Stolzenhagen, Germany. Currently, they teach at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) at the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam.

Bernadetta Statkiewicz is a The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw graduate. She was also part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska. In 2022 she joined the ensemble of the Polish Theatre in Warsaw. In addition to acting, she also paints. A mural of her design has recently adorned one of the walls of a Warsaw building. She also trains boxing, lift weights and learns how to do bar pull ups. In art and in her artistic work, she is most puzzled by the possibilities of challenging the existing reality and discovering the value of diversity, and through it, equality.

Elia Steffen (she/her) is an artist working in the fields of performance, facilitation, and curation. Her work focuses on the intersection of communal

narratives, cultural norms, and systemic violence. With over 10 years of experience as a facilitator, Elia crafts encounters that investigate the relationships between personal needs and communal truths. Heavily influenced by queer art lineages, Elia's work melds critical theory, camp, and drag in participatory performances that question audiences' relationships to each other, power, and the state. In 2021, Elia co-founded *In Pursuit of Otherwise Possibilities, Queer Performance Pedagogy and Feedback* (IPOP) within the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam. IPOP is an educational, artistic research platform exploring how educational institutions can better foster queer artists and practices.

Weronika Szczawińska is a director, dramaturge, performer and cultural studies scholar. Graduate of the College of Inter-Area Individual Studies In the Humanities and Social Sciences (MISH) at Warsaw University, obtained PhD from the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISPAN). Studied directing at the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. She has worked with a number of important theatres around Poland (including Narodowy Stary Teatr in Cracow, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, Komuna Warszawa, Wrocławski Teatr Współczesny, TR Warszawa) and Slovensko mladinsko

gledališče in Ljubljana. Assistant professor at the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. Member of the Performing Arts Institute (InSzPer) collective. Laureate of the prestigious Passports of the Polityka weekly award 2019, for „the intimate and tender performances that combine the private themes with important social issues. For the commitment, transgressing one's own career path”. Her latest works include: *Trąbka do słuchania* (based on Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*, Wrocławski Teatr Współczesny 2023), *Grzyby* (Fungi, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw 2022), *Czas porzucenia* (Time of Abandonment based on the novel by Elena Ferrante, Teatr Jaracza in Olsztyn 2022), *Onko* (TR Warszawa 2021), *Klub* (The Club, AT/TR warszawa 2021)

Monika Szufladowicz is an actress, performer, and photographer. She is a graduate of The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, where she studied in the Acting Department. Additionally, she completed her studies at The Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź, specializing in photography and earning a Bachelor's degree. Monika further pursued her passion for photography at The University of Arts in Poznań. As an Erasmus student, she expanded her artistic horizons at The Universitat Politècnica de

Valencia, focusing on fine arts. Monika's diverse educational background reflects her commitment to both the performing arts and visual expression. She was also part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska.

Meryem Elise Şengün began dancing at the age of four, making her debut as a rabbit in a multi company performance of Peter Pan at the SECC in Glasgow. She was a Junior Associate with Scottish Ballet, was awarded a scholarship to the Dance School of Scotland then went on to study at The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, graduating in 2021 with a degree in Modern Ballet. Equally at home with Contemporary and commercial dance forms, Meryem's performance experience has been richly diverse – from the ballet premiere of 'Mesdames' at the Edinburgh Festival, creating choreography with dancers of differing abilities in a project developed by the Paragon Ensemble to dancing in music videos. Meryem has a particular interest in the culture of body-shaming and its impact on dancers' mental health and how Intimacy Coordination is now being used to safeguard performers – a topic that she presented on at the Change-Now! conference in Warsaw in March 2023.

Mira Thompson is a singer, songwriter and performer. Informed by the tradition of vocal jazz, she is drawn to narrative song and strong poetic and visual elements within music. During her time at HKU Utrecht Conservatory, she developed a fascination for the different ways in which the voice can function as an embodied instrument. Whether written, spoken or sung, Mira wields language to evoke deep and buried feelings with an earnest yet witty approach. In 2019 she released her first EP *Festina Lente*. Since 2008 she has performed nationally at Mozaiek Theater, Frascati, Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, among others, and has toured in Germany and France. Invested in embodied learning and disability justice, Mira brings into question notions of accessibility and its universality through lectures, workshops and consultancy to organizations, tutors, and students. She teaches and researches for the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam. Together with Carly Everaert, she initiated the research project *Interdependence: On disability justice and the (performing) arts* supported by the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam.

Helena Urbanska was born, raised and educated in Warsaw. In years 2021-2023 she was on a contract in Współczesny Theatre in Szczecin. She's joined the ensemble of Dramatyczny Theatre in War-

saw this October 2023. Since she's finished school in 2021 she's been doing both on stage and on camera acting. She has a small dog and he's name is Piorun. She loves traveling but she claims she's spent more time on train last two years than in her own bed. She was also part of the cast of the play *The Club*, directed by Weronika Szczawińska.

Katarzyna Waligóra is an assistant professor at the Department of Theater and Drama, Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University. She also works at The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. Theatre critic and educator. Author of the book *It's not a brand new horse: on the theatrical props*. Co-editor of the monograph *Theater of ugly feelings*. Together with Katarzyna Niedurny, she hosts the *Podcast o Teatrze*.

Caspar Weimann (he/they) is a professor and mentor for acting and equal opportunities officer at the ADK Baden-Württemberg with a special focus on queer empowerment in performing art practises. Further teaching assignments for acting, intermedial performing arts and trans\*-disciplinary work led them to Mozarteum Salzburg, Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris, Hochschule Osnabrück, and many more. Aside from that they are ini-

tiator of the internet theater [onlinetheater.live](http://onlinetheater.live) and seminar and workshop leader on digital and hybrid theater strategies, on participatory theater on the internet and on the theatricality of social media.

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