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THREE MEDIATIONS ON RELATIONALITY AND HEGEMONY

NATASHA LUSHETICH



Intersecting Perspectives. De Balie, Amsterdam, 2004
Image Credit: Roel Varhallen

Let me begin by saying that, essentially, relationality can be seen as the “abyssal ground”¹ of hegemony. Understood as the formless substratum from which separate forms – relationships – emerge, relationality is comparable to gravity insofar as it is diffuse and ungraspable, but nevertheless “pulls” all the time. It is a continuous force that constitutes relationships between entities, and in constituting these relationships constitutes as well as *reconstitutes* the entities within these relationships. In other words, relationality dissolves the content and form binary since the “what” of any given constitution, be that constitution a thing, an event, a phenomenon or a discourse, is inextricably intertwined with the “how” of that constitution. The same logic of dynamic co-constitutivity can be seen operating in hegemony. To borrow Raymond Williams’ famous definition, hegemony is not only the explicit and clearly articulated level of ideology which determines what is good, appropriate and desirable in any given society, it is “a whole body of practices over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy ... a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming.”²

¹ This expression was first introduced by Martin Heidegger who associated “ground” with the Greek *arché*, which means both the “beginning, first principle” and “rule, dominion.” For Heidegger, the absence of the ultimate ground does not eliminate the process of grounding. Instead, the ground, or *grund* in German, becomes “Ab-grund” or “abyssal ground” because it continues to generate new possibilities of grounding while deferring its own fulfillment.

² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 124.

Hegemony is a specific mode of production of a wide range of social relations arising from specific social and cultural practices. More importantly, it is a self-reproductive mode of production, which, once assimilated as a commonsense, reality-corresponding structure, generates hegemonized beliefs, opinions and perceptions. It generates what Williams has termed a “structure of feeling ... elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.”³ Both relationality and hegemony are self-productive, but there is a clear difference between the two. Relationality is open-ended, a no sum game as it were, a process that, in itself, does not serve the interests of a particular party. Hegemony, on the other hand, is a game with a clear sum as it invariably serves the interests of the existing power structures.

In the pages that follow I recall three performative meditations on relationality and hegemony that I realized in collaboration with the Amsterdam-based collective subRosa between 2002 and 2005. Titled *The Virus*, *Demediatric* and *Intersecting Perspectives*, these performances are for the most part invisible, meaning that they infiltrate an already existing situation and use it as a medium and a form of transport to create a situation within a situation. This particular strategy serves two purposes: it highlights the performativity of everyday life either by inflecting the uninflected in the present moment or by creating a frame which casts a retrospectively inflective light on a given fragment of life. It also highlights the co-constitutivity of relationality and hegemony, both of which operate through performance. As the name subRosa suggests – in Latin it means “intimate,” “under four eyes” – each of these performances contains a one-on-one element, too. Like the vast majority of one-on-one performances of which there was a veritable boom in the first decade of the twenty-first century, these performances borrow from the so-called horizontal, non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer communication characteristic of the internet. Important to note, however, is that the intimacy, differentiation and exclusivity of the one-on-one situation is not so much a cry against the globalization-induced implementation of the common-denominator rule in which every difference is only the distance between the prevalent sameness and occasional “otherness” as it is a way of focusing on the smallest and most basic fragment of relationality: the interaction between two people.

The Virus

A marshmallow-like vehicle appeared on the streets of the Northern Dutch city of Groningen in the summer of 2002. Popularly called Agnes in honor of her one-time owner, the vehicle was a visual and performative intervention into the dynamics of urban space. Much like other vehicles, Agnes traversed the busy streets of Groningen, and later Amsterdam, Zagreb and Ljubljana, occasionally visiting the more recumbent residential areas as well as parks full of excited children and barking dogs.



Agnes. *The Virus*, Groningen, 2002
Image Credits: D. P. Kafka

³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 125.

Unlike other vehicles, however, the chauffeur-driven Agnes stopped every half hour, spewed out a little crimson carpet to the tunes of Frank Sinatra's *Fly Me to the Moon*, reminiscent of a time of mythical innocence and suave-yet-jolly naïveté. She picked up yet another random passerby and disappeared in an unknown direction only to appear half an hour later in a different location. This dislocation had a somewhat disorientating effect on the random passerby-cum-participant given that the vehicle's smallish windows were made of semi-transparent Plexiglas and were only knee-high, which made it impossible for the participant to see anything but the blurred contours of the nearby pavement, grass or gravel. The participant was amply compensated for this little inconvenience by the generous applause with which s/he was greeted as soon as the vehicle stopped and s/he appeared on the crimson carpet. Wherever she went Agnes caused a ripple of excited interest; potential participants were eager to find out what was happening inside, why only one participant was chosen at a time, where the vehicle was going and whether this was an advertising event, a performance or a political campaign. In my double role as director – who maintained contact with the performers inside the vehicle via the internal sound system which simultaneously recorded all performer-participant communications – and stewardess – whose task it was to ensure that all “passengers” traveled comfortably in both the physical and mental sense of the word – I was assailed by an avalanche of questions every time the vehicle stopped to pick up a new participant. But, in keeping with the strategy of invisibility, which in this case translated to indefinability, I never disclosed any clear information about what was going on inside. Upon entrance the participant found him/herself in a cozy crimson space of minuscule proportions separated from another such cozy crimson space by a wooden grid resembling a confessional. A single performer sat on the other side of the grid. The only information divulged was that the participant was going on a journey.

The Virus was conceptualized as a once-removed remediation of the internet chat room, itself a remediation of the proverbial train station or airport lounge in which vertical and horizontal time intersect. Vertical and horizontal time correspond to a number of similar temporal differentiations such as sacred time and profane time. In ritual, sacred time is characterized by cyclicity and solidity, actions performed within this time are inscriptions in the universal, or, indeed, religious order. Profane time, on the other hand, is the time of linear development of any given course of events. In profane time, flowers wither, apples rot, people and animals are born and die. In sacred time, however, their spirit lives forever. Vertical time is a term often used in music and is similar to sacred time insofar as it exhibits both stasis and cyclicity. A good example of this is one-tonal music, which has no tempo variation, no “opening” and no “closure.” From the beginning to the end mono-tonal music consists of a single sound and is, as such, endlessly repetitive. Repetition is also the reason why it produces a sense of timelessness which often has a hypnotic effect on the listener. Cyber time is in many ways similar. Like vertical time, it is not irreversible which is to say that it does not exhibit a progressive passage from state A to state B, as does a rotting apple. Rather, it exhibits stasis like mono-tonal music. In this sense, the internet user inhabits two parallel species of time: the vertical time of stasis and the horizontal time marked by the need to get up to stretch one's legs or make a cup of coffee. Apart from intersecting vertical and horizontal time, the internet chat room also intersects distance and proximity, establishing relationships of augmentative reciprocity. The farther away people are, the closer they may feel precisely because they are far away. The less they know each other, the more inclined they may be to share their innermost secrets. In this sense, the stranger is the opposite of the neighbor. Whilst a neighbor often remains forcefully close, so to speak, a person whose imposed physical proximity obliges one to develop congenial neighborly manners which exhibit all signs of closeness, familiarity, even intimacy, and which, for this very reason, more often than not prevent intimacy from taking place; a stranger encountered in a place riddled with multiple strands of horizontal time, such as an airport or a train station, often seems unexpectedly close precisely because s/he is far away.

The momentary physical closeness in space and time is amplified by past as well as pending distanciation. These and similar encounters thus operate both in vertical and horizontal time, resonating in the realm of the universal as well as in the realm of the particular. Henri Lefebvre calls this *the moment*, “a higher form

of repetition, renewal and reappearance and of the recognition of certain determinable relations with otherness (or the other) and the self.”⁴ It is “passion and the inexorable destruction and self-destruction of that passion. The moment is an impossible possibility, aimed at, desired and chosen as such. That which is impossible in the everyday becomes what is possible, even the rule of impossibility.”⁵

Sudden close encounters in which the impossibility of otherness is made possible are festivals of the mind and the heart. In a split second, the interpenetration of the possible and the impossible establishes itself as an absolute existing in a brief and fragile moment of horizontal time. This paradoxical relationship between the particular and the universal, closeness and distance, the temporally horizontal and vertical, present in airports, train stations and internet chat rooms was specifically targeted in *The Virus*. The horizontal passage of time was textured by the sounds of the city which could be heard at all times – the traffic, the sirens, the voices, the gravel – as well as by the rapidly changing landscape which could be seen – or, rather, intuited – through the Plexiglas window. The performers (who performed in “shifts,” one at a time, usually for two hours, giving four consecutive performances) were carefully chosen for the texture and resonance of their voices, crucial for establishing a sense of closeness, as well as for the fact that they were either natives or long-term inhabitants of the cities where the respective performances of *The Virus* took place. Once a participant entered the vehicle, it was the performer’s job to weave a meaningful interaction based on the emotional cartography of the city, in which the city became an agglomeration of past-present “moments.” Furthermore, they were chosen for their improvisational as well as mnemonic skills, the most frequently used improvisational device being the metaphor which is the linguistic equivalent of “the moment” since it encourages the interpretation of one thing in terms of another, thereby condensing and overlaying diverse fields of human thought or action. Lastly, the performer’s mnemonic ability played an important part since s/he always used the threads and motifs established in the previous interaction to “weave” the current exchange.

Each performer had a number of possible openings and these included laughter, silence, muffled tears, humming a tune, a telephone conversation with someone else on which the participant was implicitly invited to eavesdrop, and direct speech. In case of the latter, the performer opened with personalized metaphorical speech, such as “I often get that foggy feeling in spring” or “On a day like this I feel as tall as a mountain.” Most participants interpreted such an opening alongside the visual context of the “confessional” as an invitation to intimate philosophical reflection. If the participant responded eloquently, as many indeed did, the performer began to weave in some of the previous participant’s reflections, but also speech patterns, sighs and pauses into the current interaction, thus performing the process of tracing. The purpose of using spatial metaphors was to explore the emotional cartography of the city by overlaying the mental, the physical and the social production of space.

Indeed, spatial metaphors that worked particularly well such as “my whole life has been a waiting room” often engendered predominantly silent interaction pregnant with unsaid words and syncopated by an occasional sigh or an “oh, well...there you go,” characteristic of people engaged in reminiscence. In the recordings, “the moment” was most palpably present, not only textured by the silence of the interlocutors, but also by the sound of traveling – the sound of a parallel horizontal temporality. A slightly more risky opening, often practiced by the Croatian actor Vilim Matula, which enticed a particularly engaged response from a number of participants, was bursting into tears, crying inconsolably for several minutes, then apologizing profusely and finally admitting “I feel like a toilet.” As soon as the participant overcame the initial concern – for being taken in an unknown direction in a vehicle of, for some, uncomfortably small proportions, whilst what seemed like the only other person in the vehicle sobbed in semi-shadow,

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life II*. Trans. John Moore. (London: Verso, 2002): 344.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life II*. Trans. John Moore. (London: Verso, 2002): 347.

did cause concern – s/he embraced the metaphor and engaged in touching and, at times, poetic reflections on the impuissance one sometimes feels in the face of life.

The role of the performer was that of a catalyst which provided the initial impetus for the process of weaving in which each thread tied the participant's ruminations, impressions, feelings or confessions to multiple other threads, thus creating an auditory tapestry. As mentioned earlier, all exchanges were recorded. Upon leaving the vehicle I approached the participant, handed them an invitation to the next phase of the project, an announced (thus visible) exhibition in a gallery and asked for their permission to reproduce the material in edited form. In the gallery, Agnes became a residual object in which the ruminations of the city's inhabitants were played via headphones. In this part, the visitors to the gallery could sit on both sides – that of the participant and the performer – and listen to a series of "moments" woven of mental, social, emotional and physical space and vertical-horizontal time. The pattern of weaving was different in every city because the rules of comportment, in other words the performativity of relationality, differed considerably. However, the subtly emerging "hue" was also apparent, despite its many variations, due to the ways that every participant incorporated into his/her rumination the themes, and often, the speech patterns of the previous participant. The observation that people react amicably and often obediently to suggestion is by no means new; as humans we depend on cooperation. What did seem interesting and surprising, however, was the fact that the speed, the rhythm, the texture and the intensity of the *movement* of relationality could be so palpably felt. In this sense the piece brought to light the ways in which relationality may be sculpted in an auditory medium.

Demediocratic

As the title suggests, this project renders visible the relationship between consensus and mediation by producing a de-medio-cratically conceived work of art. It was first performed in November 2003 in Amsterdam during the 24-hour event hosted by De Balie entitled *What Would You Do for Art?* and subsequently re-performed at a number of art centers throughout Europe in 2004 and 2005. Mediation is the process of forming a connecting link between two or more entities or occurrences, an intervention into the existing state of affairs, with or without an explicit purpose or intention. Coming from the Latin *consentire*, the literal meaning of consensus is to "feel together"; the word thus refers both to the process of group decision-making and to commonly held beliefs and sentiments. Throughout history there have been countless interpretations of the value and purpose of art – imitating nature, depicting beauty, conveying philosophical verities, revealing phenomenological, emotional or religious truths. Likewise, there have been countless as well as vastly different cultural views on how one should relate to art. Whilst most traditional European art favors definite object-hood, a clear frame, clearly identifiable authorship and the viewer's aloof engagement, the value of traditional native American art, for example, seen in the Navajo sand paintings, is considered to reside in its creation, not preservation, and this is the reason why these paintings are destroyed immediately after their completion.

Both the production and the consumption of art are closely related to culturally specific and period specific methods of knowledge production. Classical art thus retains an umbilical connection with Aristotle's notion of mimesis. Usually translated as "imitation," mimesis departs from the divide between the image on the canvas and the thing or the world this image represents, the underlying assumption being that there exists a fixed and stable reality and that this reality exists *a priori*, before all experience. Since the performative turn of the 1970s, however, in fields as diverse as art, anthropology, linguistics and sociology, performance is a preferred method of knowledge production. Aptly characterized by the performance theorist Dwight Conquergood as a "shift from mimesis to kinesis,"⁶ this method of knowledge production

⁶ Dwight Conquergood, *I am a Shaman; A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 83.

treats performance not as a temporary enactment of a reality that exists independently of agents and actions, but as that which *produces* reality.

Art can also be seen as fundamentally influenced by the prevalent economic relations. According to B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, recent history comprises three distinctly different economic eras: the commodity economy of the first half of the 20th century, the service economy of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in which service takes the place of tangible commodities, and the experience economy of the 1990s and 2000s in which the chief economic output is experience. As the authors of *The Experience Economy* suggest, experience is created by “inging the thing” or “experientializing the goods.”⁷ A good example of this is the recent Nike campaign in which the consumers of the “Nike experience” – prospective buyers of the Nike shoes – play basketball with a laser projection of Michael Jordan. The highly socially productive capacity of such and similar experiences, based on active participation, multisensorial interaction and immersion, serves another economic purpose: it organizes consumers into clubs and finally a branded way of life. It could be argued that with the exception of the historical avant-garde – Dada, Futurism and Surrealism – much of the pre 1950s and 1960s art, that is to say pre-minimalist, pre-performance art and pre-conceptual art did, indeed, have much in common with commodity fetishism. An art object, a painting or a sculpture, can be seen as an object of “affective presence,” which, as Robert Plant Armstrong points out in *The Powers of Presence*, is the quality an object acquires as a result of the way it has been treated. When objects are treated as subjects they “begin to exist in a state of tension between these two poles: being subject and being object.”⁸ In marked contrast to this, the 1960s and 1970s called for a decisive rupture with object-based relations, evident in much performance-oriented work of such artists as Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Alison Knowles, Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramović, to name but a few. Likewise, much of 1990s and 2000s art focused on immersion, (often networked) interactivity and the production of social life. This can be seen in the work of groups like Blast Theory who make projects with game-like structures which involve hundreds of participants and last up to a month, or The Yes Men, a group of culture-jamming activists who create fake organizations which host hybrid socio-aesthetic, ludico-activist projects with the aid of thousands of virtual interactants.

However, the relationship between the various economic eras and the corresponding art forms could also be seen in very different terms: it is not economic relations that influence artistic practices but it is artistic practices that use the various economic forms to ironic or subversive purposes, as was the case with Ken Friedman’s 1972 *Professional Services*, in which the artist offered a wide array of hourly paid services, artistic as well as administrative and manual, or with The Yes Men who famously managed to infiltrate the World Trade Organization in 2000 and have been posing as members of the WTO since then. *Demediocratic* probes the fragile and constantly shifting interconnection between the various values and purposes of art, the socio-economic framework in which these values are embedded, the shifting role of the artist and the forming of public consensus.

In the first, “invisible,” non-announced phase of the project a number of performers interview a wide range of the visitors to the art center, ensuring that the “sample” on which the data analysis is based includes interviewees of varying ages, ethnicities and professions. Meanwhile, another performer reads out a random selection of texts whilst stirring ash in a transparent astray projected onto the wall thus referencing fortune-telling and divination. Performers read into a microphone texts that resemble artists’ statements or art criticisms, such as:

⁷ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business is a Stage*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999): 23-24.

⁸ Robert Plant-Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth and Affective Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981): 3.

The artists see their monstrous creations as puzzles, mathematical variations or ironic combinations of wordplay and bad taste. Their stated cynical intent is to attempt to reach a cultural value of nil, to create an aesthetic of insensitivity and indifference. Therein lies the tragic dimension of their oeuvre.⁹

as well as short communications about life events, such as:

Satoru Fushiki was accidentally hit in his left eye by an air gun pellet on January the third 1943, near his home at Kasuga Jinya when he was 13 years old. He was hospitalized for a month but the bullet was not removed from his head. Instead, it has remained in his head to this very day. Mr. Fushiki is thus the longest living person with a bullet in his head.¹⁰

The interviewees are asked twenty questions in total. These questions belong to the following four categories: attitudes to art, attitudes to the artist, attitudes to the art establishment and personal perceptive and emotive qualities.

An example of the first category is:

What would you say is the foremost role of art?

- A. To reveal a different world behind this world
- B. To make us laugh at our mortality
- C. To teach us how to look at things in a different way
- D. To offer a brutally honest critique of the society we are living in
- E. To confuse us into saying “Well, if that’s art I am glad I am a social worker”
- F. Other

The second category consists of questions like:

How important is the artist’s personality in relation to the value of his/her work of art? (henceforth referred to as WOA)

- A. Very
- B. Moderately
- C. Marginally
- D. Utterly unimportant

Within the third category the interviewees were asked questions like:

Should the artist demonstrate an awareness of the current political policies when working on a new WOA? E.g. make the work accessible to troubled teenagers or interesting and inviting to non-integrated Moroccan grandmothers?

If yes, could you rank the percentage of such awareness desirable in a WOA?

- A. 25%
- B. 50%
- C. 75%
- D. 100%

The fourth category consists of questions such as:

⁹ Author’s private archive.

¹⁰ Author’s private archive.

Have you ever been deeply moved by a WOA?

- A. Art has given you the strength to face the not-so-pretty facts of life such as illness and isolation
- B. Art has sporadically inspired you to euphoric sprees and good deeds
- C. Art has sent you sobbing in the nearest dark corner many a time
- D. Art has inspired a feeling of superiority in you: “I could have done that with my little finger”
- E. Other

Or, indeed:

Do you find that your taste in art corresponds to your hobbies or recreational activities? E.g. you play golf and are therefore fond of action painting, or, you like to spend your Sundays DIY-ing in the garden shed and have developed an appreciation of Duchamp?

After a few hours of such interviews, the data is processed; the personal situation- and perception-related questions are read against the evaluative ones. The findings are then mapped onto graphs and charts and communicated to the audience, encouraged to pose questions related to content and/or methods. At the end of the fixed durational period of either twelve or twenty-four hours, this information is used to produce a demediocratically conceived WOA. The three most often produced WOAs were: oversized clog shoes made of lead, breath captured in a balloon and given to the first passerby, and, a condom bearing an inscription in Braille.



Demediocratic. De Bakie, Amsterdam, 2003

Image Credit: Roel Verhallen

These WOAs were produced in response to three very different sets of results obtained consistently, regardless of culture or country. Oversized clog shoes made of lead ensued from a set of results indicating, in the first place, a distinct sense of disenchantment with contemporary art and artists. According to this group, the latter were trading only in mildly innovative ways of recycling old concepts. The general consensus was that contemporary art lacked grounding, meaning and a concrete connection with everyday existence, that it seemed lost to a world of intricate cross-referentiality accessible only to “inside traders” as it were. The second WOA was made in response to a group of people who found the current state of art wanting in the area of basic human-ness and *joie de vivre*. According to this group, new forms of art were welcome, but had to enable one to feel the same closeness to Mother Nature and the joy of living as did the old masters in their paintings of beautiful landscapes. For this group, breath, a basic signifier for human life and also inspiration (the Latin root of the word means “to breathe in”) was placed in another

suitable signifier of fragility and ephemerality – a balloon – and given to a randomly chosen “fellow human.” The third group manifested a preference for throwaway materials as well as the less orthodox forms of communication, but opined that a WOA nevertheless had to deliver a message. For this group, a temporary sculpture was made of disposable material – condoms – inscribed with a citation from Socrates or Nietzsche, in other words, a clear message, such as “know thyself” or “God is dead.”

The (continuing) fascination with this project resides in the concretization of as elusive a category as “public opinion,” the opinion held by the “average” art center visitor, or indeed the “average educated reader.” Apart from disclosing the operation of the proverbial “populist philosopher,” which, according to Antonio Gramsci¹¹ is always already present in all hegemonic formations and constitutes their counter-current and thus a potential point of hegemony’s dissolution, *Demediocratic* raised questions about the mediated relationship between the audience and the artist. Throughout history, the role of the artist has varied from craftsman, disseminator of spiritually uplifting experiences and producer of financially lucrative objects to consciousness-raising social actor and, finally, facilitator. Although the latter has been the dream of many avant-garde artists, such as the Dadaist Tristan Tzara or the Fluxus chairman George Maciunas, who fervently advocated the abolition of art as an institution and whose socio-political endeavors could be summed up as: “creativity to the people!” – one is left wondering about the extent to which art (the liberating sense of democracy inherent in art for all and art by all included) has been assimilated into capitalist hegemony. In the current technologically developed media culture which has mastered the art of integrating, and, importantly, marketing all challenges – where even the ecological disaster caused largely by the capitalist mode of production is marketed as a chance for a new, better and more kosher capitalism, termed ecological capitalism – one is left wondering about the limits of possibility. On the one hand, the strategy employed in *Demediocratic* makes use of the custom-tailored approach utilized by the experience economy. On the other hand, it ironizes it. By ironizing it, it both mediates public opinion and is mediated by it. This double mediation simultaneously critiques the colonization of creativity and attempts to discern possible counter-currents to the prevalent modes of opinion-production.

Intersecting Perspectives

Realized in 2004 at De Balie, Amsterdam, this project once again resorted to one-on-one interaction in a space of purposefully modest proportions. The installation consisted of two identical parts connected by a swivel mechanism which enabled viewer A to take a look at the space B and vice versa.



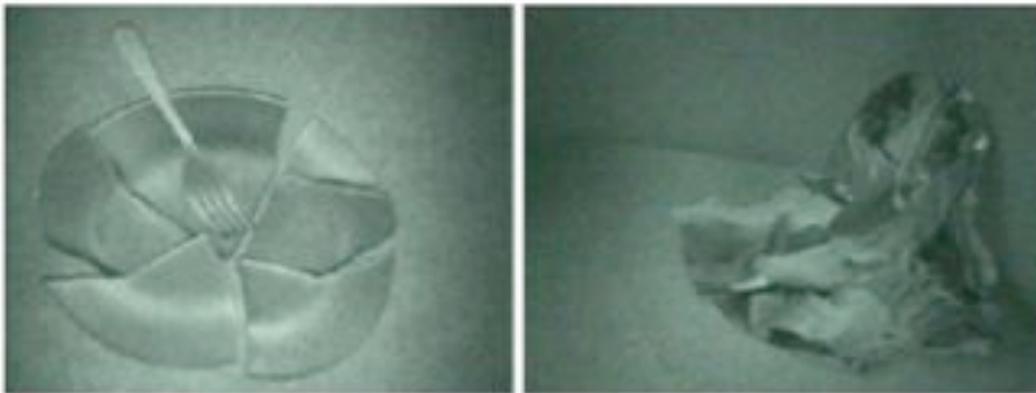
Intersecting Perspectives. Installation, De Balie, Amsterdam, 2004
Image Credit: Reza Tehami

¹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Eds. & Trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

The visitors to this cinematic installation/performance were asked to make a booking in advance and come with a person of their choice – a partner, a friend or a family member. Upon arrival the two visitors were greeted by a jovial usherette and asked to toss a coin. The person who got heads was directed to space A and henceforth spoken to in mellifluous tones, offered a glass of champagne and a beautifully embroidered cushion to sit on. The tone was light, witty, even flirty at times. This initial communication was employed as a speech act, which, according to J.L. Austin creates a change in reality, such as when a judge pronounces a defendant guilty.¹² Within the specific context of *Intersecting Perspectives* the usherette’s verbal address authorized visitor A to a jovial, ironic distance from the performance s/he was already taking part in, whilst simultaneously implying that his/her wellbeing and opinion were of utmost importance. Visitor B, on the other hand, was treated without finesse, there was no champagne, no cushion, nobody offered to take his/her coat nor was interested in how s/he felt. Instead, s/he was “dumped” in space B and henceforth treated as a “B person,” thus implying a second rate status.

The part of the installation referred to as the “B space,” which included the visitors to this space, was measured by the standards of the A space. This echoed Slavoj Žižek’s contention that, despite all appearances, contemporary liberal pluralism has a single norm which assimilates differences by effacing them, particularly those seen as potentially dangerous. Žižek calls this standardization via “elimination of malignant properties,” found in a number of alimentary as well as cultural products such as “coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, cream without fat, sex without sex (virtual sex) ... [and]...in the recent re-definition of politics as the art of administration performed by experts – a politics without politics.”¹³ In the era of “decaffeinated belief” where human understanding is based on possessive individualism and where freedom amounts to the freedom of the choice of products, it is sameness which is encouraged; “difference” only fills the gap where the Other used to be.”¹⁴ In order to be acknowledged, “difference” has to be slight and easily translatable into the language of the norm. Any real difference, which is by definition incomprehensible and for that reason often intolerable, is assimilated into the norm and thus, in fact, erased.

Upon entrance both spaces appeared identical apart from frozen and patinized objects strewn on the felt floor, which, as the visitors later found out, were remnants of the filmed action.



Intersecting Perspectives. Installation, De Balie, Amsterdam, 2004
Image Credit: Reza Tehami

¹² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Plaidoyer en faveur de l'intolérance* (Castelnau-le-Lez: Climats, 2004): 22. Translation mine.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Plaidoyer en faveur de l'intolérance* (Castelnau-le-Lez: Climats, 2004): 23. Translation mine.

Two performers, Hannah Eijkelboom and I, were “built” into the felt walls of the installation, which enabled us to remain invisible while commenting on the filmed action. Particularly interesting was the fact that both voices were live, but the visitors to space A often thought that the performer’s voice in space A was recorded – thus in some way relayed and mediated – whereas the visitors to space B invariably thought that the performer’s voice in space B was live. This was clearly related to the attitude the visitors were encouraged to adopt by way of vocal, gestural and proxemic cues provided by the usherette and the performers. Different audience attitudes highlighted the difference between two species of staged performance: referenced representation and representation mistakenly taken for presentation. As Jacques Rancière points out in *The Emancipated Spectator*, representation or mimesis is a “regime of concordance between sense and sense” which has, since the Greeks, sought to achieve a dual effect of intellectual recognition and appropriate emotion, “predicated on a regime of concordance inherent in representation.”¹⁵ This regime treats the signs exhibited on the performers’ bodies as part of the natural language whilst neglecting the fact that “the signs of thought and feelings exhibited on the performers’ bodies are not their own.”¹⁶ Like hegemony, representation “naturalizes” that which is not natural. This is the reason why it is often difficult to see a particular representational language for what it is. The acting style of the 19th century actress Sarah Bernhardt can clearly be seen as a set of mimetic signs in this day and age.¹⁷ The acting style of Meryl Streep, however, is less readily recognizable as a set of mimetic signs because it is entwined with contemporary ideas of “naturalness” and “truth.”

Despite the fact that the representational forms of performance have largely given way to the presentational ones, representation is, as Rancière observes, still widely used in place of presentation, for reasons of aesthetic efficacy, which range from political campaigns and advertising to contemporary art.

The greeting ritual effectuated by the usherette in *Intersecting Perspectives* was crucial since it gave clear cues as to which attitude the visitor should adopt: the representation-acknowledging attitude, one of ironic distance and benevolent amusement as was regularly the case with the A visitors; or, the “naïve” attitude which made the visitor vulnerable to the emotional effects of the performance, as was often the case with the B visitors. The choice of these specific attitudes – the seemingly active “meta attitude” which gave the visitor a sense of control because of the ironic distance it created, and the seemingly passive “engaged attitude” in which the visitor succumbed to the emotions portrayed by performer B – was related to a specific hegemonic operation theorized by Žižek. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek makes the following observation: “in contemporary societies ... cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.”¹⁸ This is probably best explained by way of an example: a corrupt politician professes concern for the current economic crisis whilst blatantly channeling public funds into his/her private accounts. Everybody knows this and ridicules the politician’s lack of finesse, however, because of this ironic distance, nobody does anything about the blatant discrepancy between what is said and done. The result is that the politician stays in office and continues to channel public funds into his/her private accounts. What this indicates is that the ruling ideology has already accommodated the fact that its “subjects” do not take it seriously as well as reorganized its discourse accordingly. The ironic and self-ironizing attitude that acknowledges the existence of *bad faith* arises from the realization that there is a disparity between what a society says and what it does. However, this realization is not acted upon, nor is any attempt made to change the existing situation. Instead, it is made ironically

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. (London & New York: Verso, 2011): 60.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. (London & New York: Verso, 2011): 61.

¹⁷ For more information on Sarah Bernhardt’s acting style please see Gerda Taranov, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art within the Legend* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1992): 28.

self-conscious while disparity continues. This makes it possible for the ideological subject both to perform that to which it does not subscribe and to maintain an ironic distance from the very idea of subscribing to an idea or a belief.

Both the situation A and the situation B were rooted in the proverbial moment that occurs before one's death and consisted of abstract and for the most part disorderly memories relayed through film and live narration. Many of the memories were identical, but received in two very different contexts and thus seen from different points of view; it was up to the visitors to piece these together once they left the installation. The very first film image visitor A saw upon entering the installation was that of three elegantly dressed men with champagne glasses raised high. The men quickly disappeared into the ground only to appear again and again. This comical routine was followed by a series of snippets which showed performer A surrounded by jovial, sharply dressed fun-people immersed in work-sex (a skillful technique for having sex while working) or "the human safari." The latter consisted of hunting down and slashing one or more homeless people with swords, stealing their vital organs, then appearing at an organ party, full of hedonistically inclined and risqué individuals, dressed in white and wearing tastefully arranged "loser" organs. The organs had the status of collector's items and were, for this reason, dutifully admired by the party crowd.

In keeping with the general ironic and self-ironizing strategy, the live narration of performer A was full of ready-made witticisms and intellectual titillations. To contrast, the live narration of performer B was riddled with pauses and unfinished sentences, and operated largely through the texture of the performer's voice. On film, performer B was often seen in situations of receding content – letters slid off the page when she opened a book to read. She was seen sleeping on motorways wrapped in sheets, emerging from swamps and eating hairy cakes. These situations referenced physical discomfort and a loss of bearings.



Intersecting Perspectives. Film Still, Side B., De Balie, Amsterdam, 2004
Image Credits: Roel Verhallen

Her speech, apart from expressing an incomprehensible, deep-felt shame, was tainted with fatalistic overtones, characteristic of ideological-hegemonic operations in which an unquestioned acquiescence in the prevalent order becomes manifest. In many cases of oppression, economic oppression in particular, where life is a continuous struggle for the bare essentials and where planning makes little sense on account of the disempowered position, the oppressed often develop a fatalistic outlook on life of the “what will be, will be” variant. At the same time, however, this outlook plays into the hands of the very systems that oppress them since these systems continue to operate undisturbed, in exactly the same way as before.

When after the performance the two visitors left, they were both given champagne and conversation menus and escorted to another space where they could talk to other visitors. Typically, the visitors leaving space A were jovially disposed whilst the visitors to side B (which ended with a coffin endlessly turning on an airport luggage belt with a sign “homebound” written on it) were subdued and in some cases, visibly affected. It was usually visitor A who started the conversation and said something like: “Didn’t you have a good time? Wasn’t your side good?” thus in fact continuing their performative engagement not only with the themes, but also with the performative strategies used by the usherette and performer A in the piece. Most visitors also continued to “cling” to their interpretation of events (the interpretation performatively suggested to them) even after extensive conversations with other people.

Conclusion

The above performances function as sites in which different species of performance meet and cross-pollinate: performance as doing, showing, achievement; performance as an aesthetic action presented to others, which invites judgment; performance as an aesthetic action performed, but not presented, which does not invite judgment, or invites it retroactively. In *The Virus* and *Demediocratic*, audience members – or interactants – are lured both into the performance and into performing without any prior knowledge. In *Intersecting Perspectives* the juxtaposition between the representational mode of performance (pre-recorded film footage, parts of the accompanying live performance) and the presentational mode (the usherette’s performance) are construed in such a way as to be mutually highlighting.

What the cross-pollination of these different modalities of performance illuminates is the priority of relationality – not relationality as a universal term for the relationship between existing entities, but as that which includes the layers and the methodologies of their co-constitutivity. This further means that a constitution’s kind – what a constitution is – be it a conversation, as in the case of *The Virus*, a work of art, as in the case of *Demediocratic*, or an attitude, as in the case of *Intersecting Perspectives*, cannot be separated from the way this constitution comes into being. No seemingly stable, given situation or entity can be separated from its performative genesis and thus its inherent performativity.

Whilst performance may be ephemeral in its one-off variant, it often turns into a habitualization over time, as in the case of performed social institutions, such as the courting ritual. Although the various courting rituals are, of course, culturally- as well as period-specific, most inexperienced teenagers can perform them because they form part of the embedded knowledge. In essence, this knowledge is no more than continuously repeated performance that one samples and reenacts as one goes through life. Likewise, an individual action repeated over time – such as a comical routine one has developed with the local baker – will produce affective sedimentation which will, in turn, produce a “structure of feeling.” An accumulation of a number of such structures will create a worldview, a world, a person, a performative network that continues to disseminate such and similar habitualizations. Since, as humans, we learn by doing and imitating, it is through performance that mobile constellations constituting impressions, appearances, perspectives and, finally, ossified positions are created. It is in the moment of ossification which, essentially, is a moment when performance acquires a solid shape and thus also a frame, determined first and foremost by what is not in the frame, that hegemony begins to function. Hegemony is, in fact, the re-

pressed co-constitutivity or “background relationality” of all that has been left out of the frame but nevertheless continues to operate behind the scenes, as it were.

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