

On Agencies and Withdrawals

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Thank you, Janina, for this kind intro – and let me immediately start with a short description of two images, as I want to call them – the first one refers to a performance.

In 2013 from April to June the performance group Nova Melancholia presented in Athens, Greece, the performance “Adieu. A eulogy to Emmanuel Levinas”. The premiere took place in the Foyer of the Museum of Cycladic Art, in the upper-class district of Kolonaki, on the occasion of an opening of an exhibition. The performance was afterwards presented in the occupied theatre EMBROS and at two public squares in central Athens (Plateia Avdi, Plateia Kotzia). A female performer, wearing a dress in deep purple (at the premiere) and purple tights, stepped in front of a microphone and read the text “Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas” by Jacques Derrida – read by the French philosopher himself at the funeral of Levinas in 1995 in Paris. In front of her and slightly to the right was a slide projector showing portraits by renaissance painters (at the premiere, the slides were projected low and from a very small distance, onto the right wall; at EMBROS the slides were projected onto the background of the stage and from a reasonable distance; there was no projection at the public squares). Next to the slide projector stood a crystal vase with long white flowers (at the public squares, the vase stood empty from the beginning).

After finishing with the text, the performer sang a cappella and in succession two folk songs by the famous Greek songwriter Vassilis Tsitsanis (For the Greeks amongst you: Σαν απόκληρος γυρίζω – Απόψε κάνεις μπαμ). She then took the vase, emptied it from the flowers and made a round asking for some money from her audience for the performance just presented.

The second image I would like to briefly refer to tries to very roughly outline the context, in which the performance took place – it is namely the image of the city I am talking about: Athens has since 2009 increasingly and rapidly transformed into a city dominated by poverty, homelessness and despair. The very centre of Athens is full with either ravaged and/or burnt down buildings (the results of uprisings and riots of the recent years) or abandoned premises of small and, indeed, bigger businesses and shops that were shut down as a result of the violent fiscal adjustment that the land has to go through. There are still bigger or smaller demonstrations taking place almost every day, in all possible places, mostly violently cracked down by the police. Despite this regular uproar, Athens has over the last years increasingly become a rather quiet city, with less cars – people cannot afford them anymore – and much less people around. Athens resembles a strangely abandoned city, a city left behind.

At this point, I would like to clarify that the two images I am referring to here are meant to serve strictly as examples of a devastated milieu and of an artistic response to it. In what follows, I would like to try to think these two images together in order not to reveal the exegesis of the performance or the Athenian situation for that matter; I much rather intend to stimulate a specific thinking towards possibilities of artistic intervention and agency in a despondent and hopeless context.

Let me start with some rather basic remarks on specifically agency and action.

While ‘action’ is very much connected to an end, a result, an effect creating or changing or more broadly doing something, ‘agency’ refers to a possibility or potentiality to act. ‘Agency’ would be the potency to effectuate, the force to operate, the capacity to do. ‘Agency’ would then constitute a rather subtle, more suggestive than active, attribute to the subject enabling it to act, to bring about change, to create etc. ‘Agency’ is, in this sense, rather situated at the “forecourt of the action” (im Vorhof des Handelns) – a phrase I am borrowing from the philosopher Joseph Vogl and from his book “Über das Zaudern” (translated in English as “On Tarrying”). Vogl describes and analyses in this book what he calls a “tarrying system” (Zaudersystem), which accompanies (quote) “the imperative of action and accomplishment like a shadow, like a ruinous antagonist”; hesitation would serve as “a gesture of questioning [...], in which the oeuvre, the action, the execution are conceived not under the aspect of their implementation, but rather in the process of their emerging and becoming.” (unquote) Agency is certainly connected to action and implies intention and effect; however, it reveals a crucial affinity with a situation that is (quote Vogl) “neither action nor non-action; instead, it marks a topos, where the components, the conditions and the implications of action are gathered, where the action is not articulated in its execution, but rather in its initiation.” (unquote)

I think the point I want to make is clear now: I am choosing to connect ‘agency’ not immediately to action and result, but rather to focus upon its potentiality. To understand it as precedence, and indeed as a moment or a topos where no affirmed action has occurred, but where a certain contingency is articulated. To understand agency as potentiality means to accept the fact that it necessarily coexists with the possibility not to develop and articulate itself as an action; it means to recognize the fact that it allows questioning, uncertainty and the coexistence of a countermovement that I would call ‘counteragency’.

On counteragency and non-intervention, then. I insist in understanding these two notions not as forces capable of inducing neutralization or in fact sublation. It is important to understand them as movements that coexist with and perpetually contradict their antagonists as their ‘ruinous counterparts’, to quote Vogl once again. I am talking about an open and unhealed antinomy or conflict that challenges affirmation and that – quote Vogl – “keeps on insisting in all the answers and solutions”.

I would now like to explore and analyze my first image – my performance – as an articulation of counteragency and as an occurrence of movements that emphatically defy action as well as intervention; as a situation that favors withdrawal instead of energetic presence and that nevertheless articulates this through a performance.

By this I mean that the fundamental contradiction operates here from the outset and de facto: we have a performance – which is widely associated with a sort of intention and with doing something – and we have public space – so we have a sort of intervention. As a performance in public space it cannot NOT do something and it cannot NOT intervene. My suggestion here would be that the performance, without being able to negate its presence as active intervention, makes something visible that goes along with this and that for me constitutes an ethical (and if you want political) proposition in facing desolation and despair that goes beyond activity and that avoids the traps of the imperative of creation and participation.

In order to articulate counteragency and to propose an ethics beyond action the performance uses certain tools that I would like to introduce briefly below. At this point, in an attempt to think towards a productive contradiction, let me quote Josef Vogl once again, as he reflects on the connection between hesitation and event as an apparent antinomy that persists (quote): “The pragmatic aspect of the act of tarrying lies in the de-activation, its aesthetic dimension in the break and its sense in an interrogative force; it marks thereby a precarious interval into the advent of the act, an interim, which endures until the act becomes an event and is pushed onto the stage of the space-time coordinates as event. It holds the event back until the moment of this leap. Tarrying is then to be conceived as an event-residue in the event, as a latent, insistent reservation in what is done and suffered, in what is manifested and indeed happens.” (unquote) It is clear, I assume, that neither Vogl nor me are talking about mutual exclusion here but much rather about an inevitable coexistence. With this, I am closing the first part of my presentation in order to proceed to a closer look at the performance and its articulations.

1. The Monologue. The first method the performance uses toward an articulation of counteragency is to refrain from dialogue. The audience is watching a solo performance or a monologue if you want – since we do have a text here that is recited by one performer. By choosing to depart from dialogical schemes and to insist on a monologue recited moreover in front of a microphone – which means that the monologue is meant to be addressed and that it is not a personal thing concerning the one enunciating it –, the performance articulates an ethical stance that rejects dialogue as an inadequate and problematic instrument.

We all know that, following the classical definition, the core-characteristic of drama – which in fact and indeed very roughly consists in the presentation of a conflict and its subsequent solution – is the form of dialogue, in which two opposite parties argue for a sublation of the subject at stake. This of course is a deeply idealistic, utopic and formalistic way of seeing dialogical debate; fact is, that participation in dialogue presupposes the maintenance and unconditioned acceptance of certain power relations and an imposed ideological setting. There is no dialogue beyond and out of a very specific context that is set and suitably adapted by the dominant power. There is no such thing as a ‘democratic dialogue’ – unless of course one understands democracy solely as the condition of ‘people being able to vote’.

Back to the performance though, which proposes to give up dialogue in favor of monological schemes as sufficient tools for confrontation. Rejecting dialogical forms suggests a refusal

towards the imperative of participation, which again depends very strongly on the setting it occurs. This setting, exactly like the context of a dialogue, obeys to predominant sets of thinking and behaving and adheres to the ruling ideology. Monologue, as I would want to interpret it here, follows at one hand a certain ethics of departing and suggests at the same time a certain politics of addressing (since, as I already said, the performance is meant to be presented and this monologue is recited in front of a microphone and in front of an audience). In this double movement I would place the contradictory tension that allows an articulation of withdrawal to even penetrate an ex-expression.

2. The Non-Action. The second instrument of the performance that enables the establishment of a countermovement goes in a similar direction: I am talking about the minimal space the performance occupies and the absence of actual – physical – action. In this sense, the performance performs indeed a desertion – in that it positions itself in an emphasized narrowness, in the smallest possible space – and refrains from activity or indeed action – also a core- characteristic of a classical definition of drama. Let me here however quote Josef Vogl once more as he approaches the meaning of the ancient Greek verb ‘dran’ – from which derives the word ‘drama’ – prompted by the analysis of the question Orestes poses just before killing Klytaimnestra, his mother, in the Oresteia – Orestes asks ‘ti draso’ – ‘what to do?’ – and Vogl says (quote): “While *prattein* is oriented towards a *telos* and an accomplishment of an action and while *poiein* accentuates the work on an object and production, ‘ti draso’ or *dran* – in the sense of ‘committing something’, ‘wanting to do something’ – opens up a dimension, in which the agency of the action is itself at stake.” (unquote)

What interests me here is the suggestion to think the verb *dran* and consequently drama as including the possibility of a (latent) countermovement able to hold the action back and eventually to suspend it. Performing a drama of non-action means to reveal, put forward and extend this quality capable of suspending the act.

3. The Non-Response. So, the performance consists in a monologue recited by one performer standing more or less still behind a microphone – it is, in other words, an address without the expectation of a response, without the hope of an answer. At the beginning of his speech, Derrida asks about the conditions and circumstances he is in, when addressing the eulogy and he says: (quote) “Whom is one addressing at such a moment? And in whose name would one allow oneself to do so? Often those who come forward to speak, to speak publicly, thereby interrupting the animated whispering, the secret or intimate exchange that always links one, deep inside, to a dead friend or master, those who make themselves heard in a cemetery, end up addressing directly, straight on, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond.” (unquote) The performance does thus exactly what it says: it speaks publicly and it addresses a speech without expecting a response; in other words, it speaks in the face of a stillness.

Maybe the stillness the performance addresses is the dying or dead city that surrounds it; the ‘dead friend or master’ is maybe the silent setting it is placed in. The counteragency derives here from the fact that the address has to be articulated although aware of the fact that it cannot be replied. Derrida quoting Levinas on death this time: (quote) “There is here

an end that always has the ambiguity of a departure without return, of a passing away but also of a scandal (...) of non-response and of my responsibility.” (unquote) So, the performance occurs as an articulation of responsibility – as an ethical or political stance, as I said before – despite or maybe because – and this is also a contradiction that persists – of the silence of those addressed. The performance cannot NOT speak, although it cannot expect an answer. Here is how Levinas, quoted by Derrida, describes and in fact defines this contradiction: (quote) “Someone who expresses himself in his nakedness – the face – is in fact one to the extent that he calls upon me, to the extent that he places himself under my responsibility: I must already answer for him, be responsible for him. Every gesture of the Other was a sign addressed to me. (...) The Other individuates me in my responsibility for him. The death of the Other affects me in my very identity as a responsible I . . . made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other, this is my relation to his death. It is, in my-relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor.” (unquote)

‘I must already answer for him’ – by addressing a monologue of non-action, the performance gives a possible answer in proposing the allowance of a countermovement. However, this countermovement, in fact, revokes the certainty and the positivity of an answer. Instead, it insists on articulating what Derrida following Levinas calls a “question-prayer” (a ‘question-prière’ – prière meaning in French not only ‘prayer’ but also plea, request, appeal etc. – remember here the last scene of the performance, in which the performer asks or begs for some money).

The ‘question-prière’ would be (quote) “anterior to all dialogue” (unquote) and would resume all responsibility and ethical obligation to address a stillness, to speak to a non-respondent. It is important to emphasize and perhaps even broaden the antinomical nature of this ethical necessity in order to push counteragency as the adequate ethical attitude when facing unspeakable sorrow. It is important to articulate the ‘question-prière’ precisely as a question refusing vehemently and categorically either to adopt a circulating opinion or to accept a ‘solution’. It is important to keep the conflict alive in order to reveal – as Vogl says – “the pending, unsettled questions and problems” (unquote) that insist and unsettle. If we are to understand the performance as ‘question-prière’, then we have to ascribe to it what Vogl calls “an idiosyncratic accurateness” which includes: (quote) “an idiosyncrasy against the consistency of world situations, against the irrevocability of judgment, against the finality of solutions, against the determination of consequences, against the duration of principles and the power of results; and a founded distrust against all sorts of booms promising salvation and healing.” (unquote)

Performing the farewell. Let me close today’s talk with few thoughts on movements of withdrawal carried out by theatre. First, and in order to bring together the most crucial remarks for these last thoughts, let me briefly sum up: I conceived the performance as an emphasized articulation of refusal of dialogue, of action, of expectations – instead it opts for monological forms of expression, self-constraint and a mute address. By doing so, the performance opens up a space for what I called ‘counteragency’, a movement connected to hesitation, inactivity, withdrawal. I also insisted in understanding the performance as a

topos of articulated contradiction, where both movements of ex-pression and withdrawal operate simultaneously.

In a sense, this withdrawing is absolutely compliant with what the performance articulates, namely an 'adieu', a farewell, a leaving, an escape, an exit. Moreover, the performance does not only articulate this leaving, but makes it indeed happen through its ephemerality and elusiveness, even more so as it happens in public space with different functionalities than a theatre for example. The performance articulates, thus, an 'adieu' by performing its own dying too.

This 'adieu', however, and if someone is paying attention to the recited text and takes it seriously, is very specifically supposed to be addressed to Emmanuel Levinas lying in the grave. The performing situation makes on the other hand absolutely clear that we are not standing in front of the philosopher's grave and we are not saying 'adieu' to Levinas – or not primarily at least! Instead, we are in a museum, at a public square etc., in front of a girl reciting a text, written in a rather male Gestus – to say 'adieu' to a dead friend –, a girl singing (when words are not enough anymore?), a girl asking for some money – not speaking, not singing anymore but instead crying. It is clear, I think, that this last remark refers to a last gesture of rejection the performance engages in: this rejection manifests itself in these rather subtle and suggestive elements I described here that trouble and challenge directly authenticity, authorship and consequently again agency. In lieu of a subject intentionally putting forward its agency, the performance – always playing with and hiding the fact that it is one – underlines the absence of an authority by refusing to answer the rather crucial question of "who speaks?" The performance does not articulate a personal farewell; its 'adieu' is a mute address that performs itself as an absolute necessity, as an inevitable force that calls for exit.