

Towards a Theatre of
Be()longing

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I explore the potential of theatre in a world where the idea of the "real" is in crisis. I suggest that this ongoing disruption – brought about by the collapse of metaphysical distinctions such as real/fake, true/false – remains irresolvable if it continues to treat itself as a crisis rather than recognizing itself as a condition. Rather than assuming we are cut off from reality, one might instead consider that reality itself no longer functions within the parameters these concepts once provided. In relation to these changes, the work of the actor can no longer be described as dependent on these parameters either. Building on existential philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of *dasein* and post-structuralist Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*, and merging their thinking through the lens of artistic practice, I propose a revised understanding of presence as *negotiation*. Drawing from scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, Amelia Jones, and Luk van den Dries, I examine how the tension between *re-presentation* and representation – the crisis of formulas amidst the relationality of space – calls for a reconsideration of distinctions such as mediated/present and essential/coded. This analysis contributes to the development of the concept of *per-formation* – as negotiating one's own absence – examining how theatre, as a relational space, becomes a vehicle for engaging with the collapse of traditional metaphysical distinctions, in order to *realize* (as recognize and create) realities that are processual, co-created, and very real. Under these circumstances I argue, the focus necessarily shifts from *what* to *how*, marking the emergence of the dramaturg as a pivotal figure in the creation of theatre. Every question (surrounding the making of theatre) becomes inherently dramaturgical.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION: AN OVERTURE

In this thesis, I explore the potential of theatre in a world where the idea of the "real" is in crisis. My aim is to gain deeper insight into my own artistic practice by suggesting that this ongoing disruption – brought about by the collapse of metaphysical distinctions such as real/fake, true/false – remains irresolvable if it continues to treat itself as a crisis rather than recognizing itself as a condition. If these frameworks no longer hold our experience together, then conventional understandings of alienation and ethical responsibility must be rethought. Rather than assuming we are cut off from reality, we might instead consider that reality itself no longer functions within the parameters these concepts once provided.

In relation to these changes, the work of the actor cannot be described as dependent on these parameters either. In order to understand my practice through the lens of the work of the actor and consciousness of the spectator in this collapse, I draw primarily from existential philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of *dasein* and post-structuralist Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*, merging their thinking through the lens of artistic practice.

I argue, with Derrida, that in the theatrical space, *différance* in fact operates dialectically. Here, repeatability becomes the foundation of presence, creating an oscillation between *re-presentation* (the emergence of something new through the alteration of a pattern) and representation (the reassertion of the same). I frame the relational dynamics within the theatrical space – among performers, spectators, and the environment – as the driving force that calls forth this tension. In doing so, I propose that presence functions as the "source" of *différance*, while reinterpreting Heidegger's concept of non-relational ownmost possibility into a shared experience of togetherness.

By reevaluating Bertolt Brecht's performative concept of the *Epic gesture*, I develop the idea of *per-for(m)ation*: the negotiation of one's own absence/presence, made possible and necessary by the relationality of the space. I integrate Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of *becoming* as a departure from imitation, further complicating the relationship between individual agency and collective presence.

I understand theatre as a unique space where the tension between *re-presentation* and representation – the crisis of formulas in the relational space –, embedded within per-*for(m)ation*, can be staged, in order to experience the constructed yet deeply real nature of reality together. Under these conditions I argue, the focus necessarily shifts from *what* to *how*, marking the emergence of the dramaturg as a pivotal figure in the creation of theatre. Every question (surrounding the making of theatre) becomes inherently dramaturgical.

To conclude, I introduce the neologism *be()longing* for/to something *still* to describe the condition of consciousness within this collapse – a state in which relationality, transformation, and the interplay of presence and absence become key to understanding the ongoing potential of theatre.

The structure of the thesis follows this line of thought:

PART ONE: PRACTICE OF THEORY, THEORY OF PRACTICE

- In the first chapter of Part One, I lay the groundwork for understanding the collapse of metaphysics as a central condition of contemporary experience. Drawing on key thinkers such as Derrida, Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Jean Baudrillard, I examine how traditional metaphysical distinctions are no longer sustainable in an age of digital reproduction. This theoretical foundation establishes the framework of my critique, within which my exploration of theatre as a space of relationality, presence, and transformation unfolds in the following chapters.
- proposing a revised understanding of presence as the absence of itself, following the thinking of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Building on this, I work through Heidegger and Derrida's concepts to develop my own understanding of presence as *negotiation*. Drawing from scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, Amelia Jones, and Luk van den Dries, I examine how this reconceptualization of presence invites a reconsideration of binary distinctions such as mediated/present and essential/coded. This analysis contributes to the development of the concept of *per-for(m)ation*, showing how theatre, as a

relational space, becomes a vehicle for engaging (and dealing) with the collapse of traditional metaphysical distinctions.

- In the following section, I outline the methodological considerations for a theatrical approach that embraces the concepts being developed here. I also reflect on the challenges such an approach might face, particularly in relation to the way the contemporary art industry is organized.
- Part One concludes with a discussion of the key terms and neologisms that are developed or adapted throughout the thesis.

PART TWO: MY JOURNEY TOWARD BECOMING (A DRAMATURG)

- In Part Two, in order to emphasize the personal and processual nature of this research, I trace my journey through past performances and research projects, culminating in my latest show *I:AM Momo*. This chapter reflects on the development of key themes, methodologies, and artistic choices, illustrating how my earlier works laid the foundation for the exploration of *per-for(m)ation* in *I:AM Momo*. I consider how my evolving understanding of relationality, theatrical presence, and the dramaturg-director relationship has influenced this piece, offering a practical realization of the theoretical ideas developed in Part One.

It is important to note that I am not attempting to construct a new ontology here – as this would contradict the spirit of the research itself. Everything written here serves instead to provide a thorough understanding of the way I approach theatre. By focusing on the performance space as my field of inquiry, I allow myself to speak in a more direct language; however, it remains crucial to read these thoughts as situated in, arising from, and belonging to the lived experiences of practice.

At times, reading this thesis may require patience, as I come from a background in philosophy while being engaged in performance-making – resulting in an amalgam of theoretical and practical insights. I kindly ask the reader to proceed at their own pace, taking breaks if needed, and allowing the rhythm of the text to unfold gradually.

PART ONE: PRACTICE OF THEORY, THEORY OF PRACTICE

The crisis of metaphysics

To adequately introduce my theatrical approach – I will begin by outlining some of the theoretical background of the research.

Performing existence: the ontological structure of dasein

Existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger in his highly influential book: “Being and Time” (1927) points out that beings always already exist within a context. They are already always *being-in the world*. Meaning, therefore, is never neutral, one understands oneself from within that context and exists as possibilities shaped by it: “Even where the issue is [...] one of ontological understanding, the interpretation of Being takes its orientation in the first instance from the Being of entities within-the-world” (Heidegger 1985, 245). Existence in Heidegger’s thinking is about projecting oneself into the possibilities given by one’s context as the way *to be*. Heidegger calls this understanding of existence: *Dasein*. “This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘Dasein’” (Heidegger 1985, 27). *Dasein* can exist inauthentically and authentically. Inauthentic existence, “*the they*” does not choose who to be (how to exist), but “simply” drifts along the possibilities offered by their context: “The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic Self – that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way” (Heidegger 1985, 167). But to choose oneself authentically does not simply mean to not follow what is given, authenticity is not about *what* one chooses, but *how* one chooses. It is the recognition that existence is a choice grounded in the fact that one’s ownmost potentiality is *non-being*. As Heidegger notes, the only experience that cannot be substituted or shared – which is completely ours – is our own death: “No one can take the Other's dying away from him. [...] By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it ‘is’ at all. [...] In 'ending', and in Dasein's Being-a-whole, for which such ending is constitutive, there is, by its very essence, no representing” (Heidegger 1985, 284). It is through this awareness that one comes to realize: one can never fully complete or fulfill themselves.

And yet, it is precisely this finitude that gives rise to the possibility – the freedom – of *choosing* one’s path, knowing that I can never finally be my *ownmost potentiality*. “The entity which anticipates its non-relational possibility, is thus forced by that very anticipation into the possibility of taking over from itself its ownmost Being, and doing so of its own accord” (Heidegger 1985, 264) This is a kind of play, fueled by the understanding that a choice is meaningful, *precisely* because, ultimately, it cannot guarantee meaning, where commitment gains its weight from the very groundlessness on which it stands.

In “Being and Time” Heidegger performs a profound theoretical tour de force which is of the outmost interest of mine: he shows that while remaining with an authentic choice requires standing in relation to one’s finitude – yet, paradoxically, it is this very awareness of finitude that also tempts *dasein* toward inauthenticity, into the drifting mode of “*the they*” self – the anonymous comfort of the everyday: “Dasein’s falling into the ‘they’ and into the ‘world’ of its concern is what we have called a ‘fleeing’ in the face of itself.” (Heidegger 1985, 230) This existential dialectic – *I am because I am also not* – is essential for understanding the relational movement at the heart of my own work.

While Heidegger’s observations are of outmost importance for challenging metaphysical concepts, they carry some assumptions one can argue with. First, they adopt a bird’s-eye view (which often comes when one is dealing with the question of history) where the notion of everyday driftedness becomes itself questionable. There are many reasons why someone would become what they become, and I’d argue most of the time there’s a *choice* which operates under a certain type of existence. The *call* which propels one to choose can not only come from consciousness, but also in the form of an electricity bill¹. More problematically, the idea of authentic *being* seems contaminated by metaphysical thinking, as its structure still implies an ontological imperative to “stay with the truth” (even if that truth is the absence of truth) in order to be considered authentic.² This is exactly the later critique of post structuralist

¹ Which can be an “authentic” source of the *call* I only argue, that the question of authentic and inauthentic is much more complex in practice.

² However, Heidegger states: “Dasein’s average everydayness, however, is not to be taken as a mere ‘aspect’. Here too, and even in the mode of inauthenticity, the structure of existentiality lies a priori. And

philosopher Jacques Derrida, who writes: “The extraordinary trembling to which classical ontology is subjected in *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time] still remains within the grammar and lexicon of metaphysics. And all the conceptual pairs of opposites which serve the destruction of ontology are ordered around one fundamental axis: that which separates the authentic from the inauthentic and, in the very last analysis, primordial from fallen temporality.” (Derrida 1982, 63)

Derrida's concept of différance

Derrida's notion of *différance* serves precisely to deconstruct the lingering concepts of authenticity and primordality that still exist in Heidegger's attempt to move beyond metaphysics.

Différance is a neologism created by “combining the temporal (*différer*, to defer) and spatial (*différer*, to differ) modes of difference in a movement that is neither active nor passive. It is this differential play, (re)producing the present secondarily as its effect,” as Jeffrey Mehlman, in his translation of Derrida's text “Freud and the Scene of writing” (1967) published in *Yale French Studies*, beautifully summarizes Derrida's ideas (Mehlman 1972, 74). What Derrida means by this is that *différance* is ~~originary~~: “[it] must be understood as crossed out, without which difference would be derived from an original plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary” (Derrida 1972, 81). Presence is constituted by *différance*, which does not point to an already existing source beyond itself. Derrida elaborates further on this in his famous essay “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” (1967) where he argues with writer, actor and experimental author Antonin Artaud on the question of repetition as the source of representation. Derrida writes thinking along with Artaud: “The menace of repetition is nowhere else as well organized as in the theatre [...] the interior duplication which steals the simple presence of its present act from theatre, from life, etc., in the irrepressible movement of repetition” (Derrida 2005, 311). This was the reason, according to Derrida, why “Artaud wanted to erase repetition in general. [...] Repetition

here too Dasein's Being is an issue for it in a definite way; and Dasein comports itself towards it in the mode of average everydayness, even if this is only the mode of fleeing in the face of it and forgetfulness thereof” (Heidegger 1985, 69). Still, the fact that the entire trajectory of „Being and Time” gravitates toward the project of authentic *dasein* is telling – it reveals an underlying prioritization that ultimately maintains a metaphysical framework.

separates force, presence, and life from themselves” (Derrida 2005, 310). Artaud writes in “Theatre and its double” (1938): “the theater is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice” (Artaud 1958, 75). Derrida seemingly agrees: “This is indeed how things *appear*: theatrical representation is finite, and leaves behind its actual presence, no trace, no object to carry off” (Derrida 2005, 312, *emphasis added*). But if one closely examines this thought, it becomes clear – as Derrida continues, that “[p]resence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated.” (Derrida 2005, 314). This passage articulates the concept of *différance*, in which presence is produced secondarily as the effect of difference, and differentiation is only possible because of repetition: “there is no word, nor in general a sign, which is not constituted by the possibility of repeating itself. A sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its ‘first time’, is not a sign” (Derrida 2005, 310). This thinking disallows any pre-existent world to emerge and necessitates theorizing the idea of origin as a form of the closure of representation, as Derrida writes:

Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. [...] To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity. And it is to think why it is fatal that, in its closure, representation continues. (Derrida 2005, 316)

The closure in the age of digital reproduction

Walter Benjamin writes in „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935): “Whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it brands a forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction” (Benjamin 2008, 21). This shift not only alters the status of art but also transforms perception itself. By enabling reproduction to reach the audience within their own context, “it actualizes that which is reproduced” (Benjamin 2008, 22). When we connect Benjamin’s ideas with Derrida’s notion of the closure of representation – where “the origin is always penetrated” and representation continues in its own repetition without a base – and bring this into dialogue with his later reflections in *Archive Fever* (1995), where “[t]he archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1998, 17), an interpretive synthesis begins to emerge. This constellation resonates with

Jean Baudrillard's 1980s formulation of simulacra and the hyperreal³, describing a crisis of reality under digital reproduction, where the distinction between original and copy collapses entirely.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory, [...] it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. (Baudrillard 1994, 1)

Ultimately, the movement to abolish a metaphysical landscape leads to the closure of representation, which conceals the fact that there is nothing to represent. It is itself a closure of closure. While this reveals the constructedness of meaning, it also leaves behind a haunting void. It makes no one happy.

A theatre “beyond” the closure

To help navigate the reader, I will conclude this chapter with a summary of the neologisms introduced or adapted throughout this thesis on page 27.

The dialectic of différance

I argue, that the unsolvable crisis of reality brought by *the collapse* (of metaphysics, real/fake, true/false)⁴ remains unsolvable only if it treats itself as a crisis, rather than recognizing itself as a *condition*. I would say that Derrida, by proposing the idea of *différance* to destabilize the concept of origin, does not resolve the "problem" of origin by imagining its closure. The origin of difference remains a persistent issue, contributing to the rise of populist tendencies and the public's attraction towards nostalgia. I argue with Baudrillard that *the collapse* should not lead to metaphysical despair or the rise of ethical implications that suggest people are detached from reality *forever*. Rather it signifies that “reality” does not operate anymore on the distinction of fake and real, truth and false. This opens up for a reversed reading of Derrida, one that allows an Artaudian thinking to

³ I'm not suggesting that these thinkers belong to the same lineage of thought, as they come from different disciplines, contexts, and periods. But as Benjamin writes: “just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception” (Benjamin 2008, 23) following this thought I draw connections between them to trace how shifts in perception lead to the reconsideration of metaphysical frameworks – and how, in turn, those frameworks shape perception.

⁴ In the following pages I'll always refer to it simply as *the collapse*, not just because it's shorter, but also, because it sounds more cool.

enter: If *différance* is “neither active nor passive. It is [a] differential play” such an idea invites considering the possibility that when *différance* “(re)produc[es] the present secondarily as its effect”, it is simultaneously (re)produced by presence as its secondary effect. *Différance* is not simply given, but it happens through presence, which can only exist through *différance*.

The power of repetition: re-presentation

This reversal – or reorientation –, might help justify Artaud’s attempts to stage the force of life– paradoxically, *precisely* because it opens the possibility of moving beyond metaphysics: not by resolving the dialectic, but by *playing* it. What I mean is, that theatre is a space where the closure of representation does not hold – *due to* repetition. This power reaffirms Artaud's notion that theater is the only place in the world where a gesture can never be made the same way twice, what theatre scholar Peggy Phelan in her book: “Unmarked: The Politics of Performance” describes, that “[p]erformance's only life is in the present”⁵ (Phelan 2005, 146).

In the context of theatrical performance, *re-presentation* – the ability to repeat a formula – becomes the generator of change. As it challenges representation (reassertion of the same) by *rubbing* the rehearsed formula *against* the relational space of the theatrical event, opening up an oscillation/struggle/battle between *re-presentation* and representation. This oscillation is driven both by *chance* – the possibility that something will happen differently – and by *choice* – the deliberate decision to vary the performance⁶. These forces emerge from the *interplay* between the audience, the set, the props, fellow actors, and the score, etc.⁷ This interplay is what performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte in her book: “The Transformative Power of Performance” refers to as an *autopoietic feedback loop*: “whatever the actors do elicits a response from the

⁵ Phelan’s theoretical framework based off radical, often one-off, non-repeatable forms of performance art, rather than conventional theatre. Nevertheless, I draw on her ideas to argue that the potential for *re-presentation* is inherent in all live arts, whether theatre or performance art. One might contend that performance art is more open to non-repetition – due to its heightened responsiveness to the audience and its often singular occurrence. However, this does not negate the fact that *re-presentation* is both a threat and a gift present in every live event, especially if we follow Derrida that there’s no presence without repetition.

⁶ Chance can be understood as an occurrence by accident, and as a possibility, while choice is about taking/making that possibility.

⁷ This list could be extended indefinitely.

spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop.” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38) The premise of this feedback loop is the *rubbing* itself: that something *can* go differently (maybe even horribly) due to relationality. The feedback loop not only consist of the “actual” responses of the audience; these responses can operate just as much effectively as their own *premise* – an expectation, a potentiality –, which can be understood as “energy circulating between them [actors and spectators]” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 59). This energy, as the amalgam of the premise of change, change itself and conversely: the possibility that the feedback loop might be corrupted, that the performer cannot be “present” enough – rendering the performance “dead” – can be understood amidst *the collapse* as the actor’s constant negotiation of their own absence/presence foregrounded by repetition and relationality which crucially exactly what renders a sense of *being* (here/there).

The theatrical event, in this view, becomes a practical terrain where the perspectives of Derrida and Heidegger can converge. It makes palpable the instability of presence not to negate it, but to foreground its fragility as the *condition* of its experience – a way of being *here/there*, precisely because it can never fully coincide with itself.⁸

This understanding is at the heart of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s formulation of *with*, understood as the singular plurality at the core of *being*. He writes in his book: “Being Singular Plural”(1996): “Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [se disjoint] in order to be itself as such” (Nancy 2000, 2). This coming-apart of presence depends on being *with* others: “we have access to the truth of the origin as many times as we are in one another’s presence and in the presence of the rest of beings” (Nancy 2000, 13–14). This all comes down to the fact that, “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence” (Nancy 2000, 3).

⁸ In fact, Derrida gestures toward this logic in his critique of the metaphysics of presence, particularly in his reading of Freudian deferral (which becomes a part of *différance*): “Is it not already death at the origin of a life which can defend itself against death only through an economy of death, *différance*, repetition, reserve?” (Derrida 2005, 253-254)

My only addition is this: while *with* is an ontological given in Nancy's thinking, in the context of performance, this *with* also becomes its own witness. *Withness* at the core of *being* is being *as* its own *issue*. In the generative tension between *re-presentation* and representation, *with* is not a resolved unity but a constant negotiation. It is precisely this dynamic of *withness* – this oscillation between singular and plural – that makes presence possible through the act of *presencing* itself.

The act of presencing, and the presencing act

Repetition in theatre neither abolishes nor affirms presence; rather, it performs its instability as an act of *presencing* – a contingent, temporal act of “showing up” in relation. This is not “[p]resence” as commonly understood [as] a state that entails the unmediated co-extensivity in time and place of what I perceive and myself; [...] promis[ing] a transparency to an observer of what ‘is’ at the very moment at which it takes place,” as art theorist Amelia Jones puts it when arguing against the myth of unmediated presence in her article “The Artist is Present” (Jones 2011, 18). Instead, this kind of presence “provides” transparency precisely because it “destroys presence (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident)” (Jones 2011, 18). It brings *différance* into play, revealing itself as the foregrounded question of mediaticity in which *being* itself is at issue⁹ – both as the chance to articulate oneself, and as a condition always threatened by disappearance through the very medium that enables it.

Considered in this way, the notion of *presencing* reinterrogates the conventional dichotomy “between live performance constituted by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and the autopoietic feedback loop, and mediatized performances which sever the co-existence of production and reception” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 68) – a dichotomy that Fischer-Lichte herself critiques through analyses of performances that play with the instability of presence. My addition here is that while it may be true that “[m]ediatized performance invalidates the feedback loop” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 68), the mediation of bodies on stage – when understood through the lens of *différance* – becomes the very premise of the feedback loop, because it creates the condition of *rubbing*. Mediation, in this sense, does not sever relationality; it conditions it.

⁹ By using the word *issue*, I'm referring back to Heidegger's conception of *dasein* which is an entity “ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it.” (Heidegger 1985, 32) As it *is* because of the possibility that it *is not*.

Moreover, following the same logic, while Jones insightfully observes that “the live act marks the body, understood as an expression of the self, as representational” (Jones 2011, 18), I would go further and suggest that it actually *puts the self’s absence/presence into question*. Presence, understood in this way, may help close (or at least ease) the “rift between those who view the body as an essence and those who emphasise forms of cultural encoding,” a divide identified by theatre studies professor Luk Van den Dries in his essay “The Sublime Body” (Dries 2002, 74). I propose that the body arises from this in-between – as tension¹⁰ – foregrounding the *question* of mediaticity through/due relationality.

Imitation as becoming

The theatrical event, when examined through the lenses of *interplay*, *relationality* and *per-for(m)ation*, calls for a reconsideration of representation as imitation – understood as standing in for something else – as well as of the theatrical strategies designed to challenge it. Amidst *the collapse*, such oppositional tactics begin to lose coherence and may, in fact, reinforce the very representational logic they intend to subvert. By avoiding repetition and imitation, they risk dissolving the dynamic tension between *re-presentation* and representation – the generative friction that foregrounds space as relational through repetition. In order to resist reductive readings that supports anti-representational tendencies, imitation might be more productively conceptualized as *becoming*, in the sense proposed by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book “A Thousand Plateaus” (1980): “Becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. [...] Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 238).

Imitation, in this view, is not a static act. It is a movement toward – not to arrive, but to engage. Imitation becomes a kind of relational mimicry – not simply repetition of content, but activation of potential. This redefinition matters because it reclaims

¹⁰ The anxiety that arises when one is faced with their own absence translates into Hungarian as *szorongás*, a word I could translate back into English as "squeezedness" or "tightness." This beautifully captures how confronting one's own absence foregrounds being as a feeling of limits – as body.

imitation as a *generative tool*. It allows performers to draw from *form*. It allows for training and structure without essentializing identity. And, crucially, it resituates agency not in *what* is performed, but in *how* it is performed – with what sensitivity to context, to others, to space. It is not about arresting or allowing meaning, but to making the connection meaningful.

The “menace” of repetition

However, the term *becoming* also carries within it a trap: it risks suggesting that repetition is simply the promise of change, when in fact it can just as easily serve the *economy of the same* – an economy that classical theatre, grounded in imitation, dramatic text, and the darkening of the audience space, actively sustains¹¹. Negotiation can certainly occur within imitation or repetition, but if the performer cannot check in with the audience – if their gaze remains sealed within the fictional world, partly because they cannot even see the audience – the structure may grow rigid. By not looking at the audience, it becomes easier for the performer to find safety in always acting the same way, repeating affective patterns or relying solely on body memory, risking the vanishing of the tension between *re-presentation* and representation¹².

Conversely, making eye contact as an imperative can just as easily produce the same kind of flattening. *Re-presentation as becoming*, depends on *negotiating* the next step in *light* of the relationality of the current space. This is made possible by interrogating the performer’s presence through the logic of *Epic acting*, proposed by Dramatist and theatre-maker Bertolt Brecht in “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1949), which offers a powerful critique of classical theatre’s confinements, freeing the performer into

¹¹ In fact the possibility of *re-presentation* through the *autopoetic feedback loop* „[b]y the end of the eighteenth century, [...] was seen as theatre’s inherent flaw, a nuisance which had to be eliminated at all cost. To this end, a variety of strategies were developed and tested. Apart from favoring textuality, the theatre of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strove to discipline its audiences. Theatre laws were passed, prohibiting disruptive and unfortunately often infectious “misbehavior.” The authorities tried to discourage eating, drinking, latecomers, and talking during the performance by imposing penalties. The invention of gas lighting eliminated the biggest source of trouble: the visibility of the spectators to the actors and, particularly, to each other. [...] These measures aimed at interrupting the feedback loop.” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38-39)

¹² Even the very concepts of “text” and “plot” can obstruct relational-sensitivity. Text is often treated as a prompt that must be activated in order for the performance to unfold, rather than as something to be co-negotiated with the space and its participants. The character, bound to narrative necessity, cannot fully respond to the lived events of the moment. Performing behind a fourth wall cultivates a tension between imitation and imitator that must be interrogated anew in each production. Otherwise, a single performer sticking out from the enacted world can unintentionally undermine the work of their partners, creating confusion and retrograding energies.

the possibility of active negotiation: “[T]he actor appears on the stage in a double role, [...] [the showman] does not disappear in [...] whom he is showing; from which this way of acting gets its name of ‘epic’ come – comes to mean simply that the tangible, matter-of-fact process is no longer hidden behind a veil.” (Brecht 1974, 194)

Brecht’s work may be considered a threshold for anti-representational tendencies, but while this form of interrogation can fragment – or even disrupt – the relationality of the space (by interrupting the imaginative process and placing representational agency solely in the hands of the performer through the imperative of *showing* rather than allowing the form to be *rubbed*), it also *exposes* that space. And this exposure is essential: without it, the sensation of shared presence cannot emerge.

Hence foregrounding relationality calls for an approach that embraces both unfolding and imitation, while maintaining sensitivity to the shared space. While Brecht’s interventions must be understood as deeply rooted in the crises of his historical moment, the more urgent question today is whether that crisis is still ours – and if so, how it manifests differently.

Epic gesture revisited

Interestingly, if one analyzes Brecht through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s writing: “What is Epic Theatre?” (1939), it becomes clear that Brecht himself opened the possibility of an oscillation between “character” and “self,” as he sought to separate them. Benjamin observes: “[t]he actor must show an event, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the event by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing the event” (Benjamin 1998, 11). This formulation already constitutes a kind of dialectic – an interrelation between performer and character. However, the relationality embedded in this interplay tends to disappear under the imperative of *showing*, which becomes the actor’s individual effort and primary task. If such relationality is not recognized as contingent upon the act of showing, the gesture risks forming a metaphysical layer of the “real”. A compelling illustration of this tension can be found in the influential theatre-maker Jerzy Grotowski’s text “Performer” (1987):

“It can be read in ancient texts: *We are two. The bird who picks and the bird who looks on.* [...] Busy with picking, drunk with life inside time, we forgot to *make live*

the part in us which looks on. [...] To feel looked upon by this other part of yourself (the part which is as if outside time) gives another dimension. There is an I–I. The second I is quasi virtual; it is not – in you – [...] it's like an immobile look: a silent presence, like the sun which illuminates the things – and that's all. [...] I–I: in experience, the couple doesn't appear as separate, but as full, unique.” (Grotowski 1997, 377)

This doubled perception – which Jarosław Fret the leader of the Grotowski Institute paraphrases as the sensation of “having a body and being a body¹⁴” – reveals a constitutive duality within *being(s)*. Yet by bypassing the concept of *showing*, Grotowski ends up cultivating a kind of metaphysical pride: an inward "achievement" that ultimately excludes relationality. Because this doubled perception not simply the result of *inner work*, but arises through negotiating one's absence in the relational space through the tension¹⁵ between *re-presentation* and representation. In this light, to avoid both ends Brecht's imperative can be rephrased as: *they [the actor] naturally shows the event, by being there, and the event shows them as someone there*. The showing does not point back to a source, nor point towards one. It emerges in the moment of encounter.

This shift – from a metaphysics inducing interiority to a relational feedback loop – repositions the audience. They are not merely customers anymore paying for an experience; their attention is what makes the gesture possible in the first place, forming the stage upon which the gesture is born. The spectator is not simply the witness of the performer's achievement, but more so *with(h)ness*¹⁶: co-creator of the event through their distance and proximity, which fuels the performer's negotiation, by the very fact that the gesture is not theirs alone.

Per-for(m)ation

Through the concept of *presencing* and by reconfiguring the *Epic gesture*, the work of the performer can be understood as *per-for(m)ation* – a neologism composed of three interwoven elements:

¹³ It's important to mention that what I cut out from here is exactly what I highly arguing against, as it conceals relationality (risking it to vanish): „The second I is quasi virtual; it is not – in you – *the look of the others, nor any judgment*” – the part I cut out is it in italics.

¹⁴ Jaroslaw Fret, private discussion with the author, autumn 2023.

¹⁵ And *as* the tension.

¹⁶ Reference serving as a counter argument to Grotowski's who understands the audience as witness.

- As performance: the act of doing and producing impulses on stage.
- As perforation: the act of creating holes, piercing through, and being cropped out.
- And as formation: the act of establishing or shaping relations that generate a shared sense of “reality”.

Read together, *per-for(m)ation* describes the performer’s negotiation of their own absence/presence as an act of creation through *the collapse*¹⁷. It is a process of *figuring out* together (both finding and making), a *realization* (both recognition and creation), which allows performers and audiences to witness the unfolding process while at the same time becoming co-creators within it.

Per-for(m)ation – although can be understood as the foregrounded consciousness of *the collapse* – it’s not necessarily a given. It is depending on the performer’s ability to interrogate their own *becoming(s)* – and just as much importantly on a framework which allows and enables such inquiry. This ability/possibility that affect theorist Nathan Snaza calls “freedom” in his book “Tendings”. Snaza writes: “freedom” is the “adhering *in* the situation as a possibility to be played”¹⁸ (Snaza 2004, 117). *Per-for(m)ation* as freedom isn’t a metaphysics inducing search for an ideal state, nor simply an effort to make fun of such endeavours. Rather, it entails a collaborative practice which acknowledges the relationality of space in order to create a framework which allows for *play* – to be free¹⁹ – *with(in)*, foregrounding the processual nature of realities, which are co-created, relational and very real²⁰.

The rise of the dramaturg

Amidst *the collapse*, the emphasis shifts from *what* to *how* – demanding a processual rather than goal-oriented mode of thinking. This shift calls forth from the shadows an obscure figure of the theatre: the dramaturg. No longer at the margins, the dramaturg might moves into the center of the process – where once the director stood.

¹⁷ And due to it.

¹⁸ This is a paraphrased version of a fellow affect theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi’s formulation: “Our freedom is in how we play our implication in a field, what events we succeed in catalysing in it that bring out the latent singularity of the situation, how we inflect for novel emergences” (Massumi 2014, 158).

¹⁹ Understood as the ability/possibility to interrogate one’s *becoming(s)*. In what follows, when I refer to the action of freedom at the core of *per-for(m)ation*, I will refer to it as *play*.

²⁰ That is, they are as real as it gets – providing a *space* (understood as a dialectic of framing and open-endedness, a room for *play*) in which consciousness can address and transform itself.

This is not only due to the dramaturg's object of concern, but also because of the very mode through which the dramaturg operates: an ability to work with and within relationality may stem from never quite attaining a place of one's own. I find that nobody fully knows what a dramaturg does/is – including myself. Over the two years of this dramaturgy master's program, I encountered many propositions about what a dramaturg *could* do – beyond curating venue programs – but I never managed to pinpoint out what a dramaturg *does*; what role they occupy in the theatrical space. And perhaps that's the point! The dramaturg is a figure who themselves *per-for(m)ating* – constantly negotiating their own power and influence – and, in doing so, allowing the space to breathe. One only needs to accept this condition consciously, and examine what becomes possible with(in) it.

Some thoughts on establishing a relationality-sensitive theatrical framework

As mentioned above, the *director-dramaturg*²¹ must create a framework that enables and allows *per-for(m)ation* to “happen”²² – foregrounding the relationality of space.

To elaborate on this I would like to share some reflections drawn from my experiences over the past five years – closing the rather heavily theoretical first part with a more practical endeavour, emphasizing the personal and practice based nature of my argument.

When the director becomes a dramaturg, they are no longer alone – they can lean on the insights and support of everyone involved. The rehearsal room transforms into a shared space of inquiry. Rehearsing becomes like sculpting: the material isn't just the concept or premise, but the space, the conditions, and the people. Knowledge emerges through testing. One mustn't mistake the desk for the stage: ideas only hold weight if they survive contact with the room.²³ Because the space is relational, it will always resist expectations. That's the point of making something live – with people. This relational making includes scheduling as well: allowing time for the event to unfold, and marking

²¹ This role-title signifies the shift from the *what* to the *how*.

²² This is in quotation marks as it is both an effort *and* an occurrence.

²³ You have to kill your darlings if the space doesn't affirm them.

breaks and endpoints. These gestures return the trust the process demands, establishing a framework participants can engage with on their own terms.

The performance already exists within these shared circumstances, the resistance of the space and its conditions functions as a dramaturgical partner, which must not be dismissed. Every space, since it already exists within a context, is a site specific one to some degree. There is a kind of silent violence in arriving at rehearsal to find the set already built, the lights hung, and the floor spotless – as if the space had autonomously prepared itself, severed from the collective body that will inhabit it. It creates a subtle sense of alienation, as though one is stripped from their own process. It does not serve the establishment of a shared space, if the space one is working in is itself representational.²⁴

This is why it's crucial to involve non-"artistic" labor in the rehearsal process. The performance must be carved out from where it *is*. When the work grows from spatial and material contingencies, it ceases to be a projected idea and becomes situated, embodied, and emergent. Aesthetics arise not only from concept or composition, but from how people respond to one another and to the situation. Moreover collective labor also builds trust. Facing practical problems together demands shared attention, improvisation, and care. These moments embed relational dynamics into the process, ground the group in shared responsibility, and transform the rehearsal room into a co-created, lived environment. To take collective labor seriously is to recognize that *how* we work cannot be detached from *what* we make.

The question of staging is inseparable from the question of labor, and in my work, it closely follows the thinking of Grotowski and Brecht – constituted and contextualized by my own locality, positionality, and background. In our performances – our refers to the many collaborators of mine who embody the work as much as I do – sustainability isn't primarily about resource efficiency – it's about centering the performer. The set

²⁴ It is crucial, therefore, to recognize the contributions of those often unseen: the technicians, cleaners, stagehands, and production crew who enable a performance to happen. This is not a liberal gesture of politeness or token acknowledgment. It is an ontological recognition that these people are part of the creative process. Their labor, their rhythms, their choices, are not secondary or outside of the rehearsal process – they shape its conditions, its atmosphere, and its outcome.

only matters insofar as it supports the performer's *becoming*. It either enables interaction, provides atmosphere, or acts as a visual marker – an obviously artificial world that sharpens the presence of the performer, like a cut-out figure in a cardboard landscape. But this “cardboard world” is not a limitation; it's a springboard for imagination – for both performer and spectator.²⁵

The *director-dramaturg*'s task isn't to impose a vision, but to create, communicate, and hold a clear framework rooted in the project's premise and shaped by the room, which becomes the show itself when tested by/through the audience.

Closely tied to these questions is the matter of training. After years of oscillating between rigorous physical practices and the opposite extreme – working without any formal exercises – I've come to believe that the central question is not *what* to train, but *why* we train in the first place. Without addressing this, training makes little sense, however in turn it risks undermining the relationality it often seeks to cultivate with *methods* aimed at raising “space awareness”. Recognizing this also reveals that there is no singular “training” – only *trainings*. One might train for body awareness, endurance, coordination, or something else entirely. But I don't believe people become more perceptive simply by refining their sensory capacities through targeted exercises. But their “presence” deepens as people spend time together in the space – attuning to one another's rhythms, consciously and unconsciously. Exercises can support this, but almost any practice can do so if approached with care. Togetherness has already started to shape itself, through these constellation of people, and in the room – bringing awareness *in* and *of* the *space*²⁶ while simultaneously creating it – as a form of policy specific to that togetherness. Physical exercises, then, are valuable not necessarily because they heighten perception, but because they offer a shared language – much like the difference between moving in silence and moving to music. Exercises frame

²⁵ I think about light and sound as too, performative. They should be operated live, negotiated in the moment, with their sources visible or acknowledged. This isn't Brechtian alienation – it's about recognizing the presence and agency of the technicians. They're not invisible executors of a director's will, but co-performers. Their timing, choices, and sensitivities are part of the performance's *becoming*. They hold great power. In our approach, all elements – space, light, sound, costume – are valued not for aesthetic polish, but for their ability to support a shared event.

²⁶ Again understood both as frame and as openness – a room for *play*

togetherness, similar as a glass of wine at a party: something to hold onto. They help people acclimate.²⁷

In fact, *togetherness is itself a training*. So the question becomes: how do we train it? This is new territory for me, but I've come to believe that the most important aim of training is to build trust by creating conditions for people to encounter each other as singularities – as multiplicities of views and perspectives – and as union – through shared problem-solving, experiencing something together (like singing), and being in “real” situations which probes care over individual effort (like exercises aiming for exhaustion). Training is also, for me, a way to deepen embodied understanding of the topic at hand. It becomes a form of free research – an exploration of the subject from the many embodied perspectives present in the room. Training is also important as an acknowledgement that one needs to arrive at the rehearsal, from the outside world. A shared space is not a given. And the training is also a place where the dramaturg-director is a participant allowing everyone to lead and be led, inviting vulnerability into the process. It matters that the director isn't just sitting safe in the chair, but is also being seen on the stage, exposed. One form of this can be practice-sharing sessions of the working group, where each participant could offer an exercise for the group, taking responsibility for facilitating it.

While it is the *director-dramaturg's* task to create a structure that enables *play*; it is the performer's responsibility to commit to that structure.²⁸ Trust is crucial here: structures that allow for *play* rely on it – and in turn, help cultivate it. But this responsibility is also an opportunity – a chance to deepen friendships, build camaraderie, and find one's place within the group, the situation, and the work itself, sharing with the audience something important: the process of negotiating one's absence. To foster the will to take this chance, the performer must feel genuinely listened to throughout the process.²⁹

²⁷ But they can also reinforce hierarchies, centering the authority of the one providing them – often the director – who is already fluent in the language the group is expected to speak.

²⁸ I believe it's essential for the dramaturg-director not to feel solely responsible for making sure everyone is “having fun,” because maintaining an inspiring, creative space is a shared responsibility. If it falls only on the director, it risks becoming one-sided, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of the process. When the director is also a participant, they cannot be solely accountable for the group's well-being. This must be a mutual effort, including the well being of the director as well.

²⁹ This is not simply a matter of inclusion – it is essential, because the work *is* (made from) us. Failing to recognize this relational core endangers the sharedness of the performance space.

Developing an embodied understanding of the project's premise within the working group is equally critical. It allows performers to cultivate an "outside eye," enabling them to assess the quality of a given moment or constellation in light of the work's central idea. In our process, we always share observations after an exercise or rehearsal of a scene. This reflective capacity – beyond merely existing within the process – nurtures role-specific authority and a deep sense of ownership over the work which *playing* requires.

Even though the director may have the final word during rehearsals, that authority dissolves in performance. On stage, it is the performer who stands alone before the audience, free to respond in real time. This freedom isn't total – it's bounded by trust, shared agreements, and the process leading up to the performance – but it is essential. A director must recognize that what keeps a performance alive is not the perfection of a plan, but the performer's capacity to *play* within a situation, which is completely the possession of the one on stage.

Recognizing this sensitivity introduces a crucial element to the work: the freedom of the performer's gaze, which allows to develop a relationship with the feeling of being seen. In fact this already requires a huge amount of trust towards the performer and towards the audience as well. "theatre is a frame (game) constructed so that people can look at other people" as Tim Etchells, scholar and artistic director of Forced Entertainment puts it. (Etchells 2004) I deeply believe that this is a crucial characteristic and service of theatre amidst *the collapse*: seeing each other, as singular beings united by the experience(s) of negotiating our own absence /presence.³⁰

While this may already be clear, I want to emphasize that the ideas I discuss in this sub-chapter and the use of the term *director-dramaturg* is not about outlining a devised work, rather, it is about acknowledging the relationality inherent in the rehearsal process. I deeply believe in the premise of a theatrical production which inherently

³⁰ I find it troubling when performances that explore the question of bodies interrogating their own *becoming(s)* simultaneously attempt to induce shame in the audience for how they watch. However, I don't believe shame is an effective tool for social change. Shame is not the same as accountability; it is passive, self-centered, and often aggressive. Given the mutuality of the gesture, trusting the audience – rather than reprimanding them – is vital.

contains multiple, distinct perspectives, each one not fully accessible to the others. Here the logic of *per-for(m)ation* is already at work as a dramaturgical force: the director contends with their absence on stage, while performers contend with their absence in the auditorium. This creative tension is where relationality resides³¹. Inaccessibility here is not a limitation but a generative condition that creates the indispensability of each participant, not merely through their contribution, but through the unique perspective their role brings. In this way, everyone inhabits a specific terrain of responsibility, freedom, and reflection – each marked by its own productive limits. These positions are foremost not hierarchical but differentiated: the structure of a performance must emerge from the careful integration of these perspectives, through a dialogical process that honors and weaves together each contribution.

Postscript on a relationality-sensitive framework

I would like to conclude this part by acknowledging the semi-naïveté that imbues the idea of a theatre of *be(coming)*, as trust – which is fundamental for works operating on the premises outlined above – is often difficult to achieve within the structures of the contemporary art industry.

First there's the question of trusting the process itself: the question of time. Building trust requires time because it's not an abstract principle; it must be constructed through lived encounters. But time is a scarce resource. Trusting a process becomes risky when a production has only three weeks to rehearse. Moreover, the apparatus of production has many layers. To keep everything running efficiently and to meet the demands of the industry, extensive pre-planning is often unavoidable – even before the actual work with the performers would begin (for example, needing to decide on audience seating arrangements before rehearsals even start). When so much needs to be decided in advance, it becomes easy to grow attached to one's darlings, partly because it feels safer to do so for the performers as well being subjected to the same time pressure. Coming in with everything thought out beforehand might smooth the industry's operations and relieve stress for the creators, but it also makes it harder to remain open to the reality of

³¹ Blurring these roles therefore a double-edged sword: on one hand, it can make the performance more meaningful for those involved, fostering a sense of co-authorship. On the other hand, it risks dissolving the relational friction that emerges when performers engage with a structure not entirely of their own making.

the process. It discourages a relational approach to theatre and naturally favors a representational one.

Second, there is the question of trusting one's colleagues. Trust is not given; it must be built. This is complicated by the fact that directors and performers are not trained together. Their educations are divided, each preparing students to meet the demands of an industry that, for the sake of efficiency, prefers representational thinking. Moreover, within the same profession, performers are often competitors. Helping someone else shine – by giving space for them – can feel like a withdrawal of oneself, and this can be difficult to accept. Even if the show as a whole succeeds, it might not result in personal recognition or opportunities; a producer might notice the show but not necessarily notice me. It's interesting to observe the difference between working with "non-professionals" versus trained actors. I often find that those without "proper" training more easily grasp the kind of performativity needed to establish a shared space. This may be because conventional acting training focuses on concealing stage fright rather than cultivating it. It teaches how to appear confident, rather than how to remain vulnerable. This ties into the fact that vulnerability is more easily accessed when one's career isn't at stake. But interestingly, vulnerability – being able to present oneself without excessive control – often produces a deeper, more powerful quality of performance. One might say this is a deeper form of confidence, which doesn't draw its strength from solid foundations, but from the very opposite. The ability to offer support to others, to be seen in one's own uncertainty, most often results in a richer shared space and a stronger performance overall.

And last but not least, there is the question of trust in the audience. As public funding becomes increasingly limited, makers often rely more heavily on ticket sales, which can pressure them to play it safe rather than experiment. Risk can seem too dangerous when financial survival is at stake. At the same time, not depending as much on the prescribed themes of grants can also open up a new kind of creative freedom and agency. Moreover, as a director colleague at Uniarts pointed out to me, audiences who pay high prices for performance tickets do not necessarily want to see something imperfect or DIY looking in return.

Collection of terms

The following is a short list of important terms and neologisms developed in this context.

per-for(m)ation: | As formation, performation (performance) and as perforation. The work of the performer through the lenses of my research. Negotiating one's own absence as a *presencing act*. |

wit(h)ness: | The same time witness and a co-creator (*with*). The spectator and the performer's *dis-position* during a live performance. |

re-presentation: | Altering a formula through repetition |

becoming: | a transformational "act" through/by/as/towards multiplicities. |

play/freedom: | The ability/possibility to interrogate one's becoming(s). |

a structure allowed to play with(in): | Allowed to *play* with, and allowed to *play* in. A *space* (frame and open endedness) which foreground itself as such. |

PART TWO: MY JOURNEY TOWARDS BECOMING (A DRAMATURG)

In the following chapter, I'll take the reader on a "short" ride through my journey leading up to my latest performance, *I:AM Momo*, and the writing of this thesis. To emphasize how personal this process is for me, I'll step away from academic language as much as possible, letting the story unfold in my own voice – in front of the reader, and in some sense, in front of me as well.

I have structured the journey around major production and research phases, categorized according to the shifts in terminology that emerged throughout my research.

It's important to note, that these thoughts are part of a research-journey, and if one finds some of them problematic, it is rightly so, as exactly these problematic notions propel the research forward by offering themselves to questioning.

Some may also find it contradictory that I describe myself as an autodidact while writing a Master's thesis in dramaturgy and performance. I don't use this label to mask the privilege of having access to higher education. Rather, I wish to mark that I began making art outside of academic or institutional infrastructures, which has strongly shaped how I approach it. The DIY nature of my work isn't just inspired by Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre (which I'll return to in a moment) but also by the necessity of using whatever resources I had when I started directing. My whole way of working – closely with the group, freely experimenting – comes from the experiences of making art independently. While it had its own benefits, it also left me without a proper education in how to navigate institutional structures. I'm still surprised (and deeply grateful) when someone steps in to do something I expected to do myself. I take that surprise as a gift. It reminds me to stay humble, which I believe is essential if one's aim is to create shared spaces.

The first show: 4:33 – *silence*

Beckett's play and the concept of our adaptation

The whole research which has led to writing this thesis has started in 2020 with the show 4:33, which I redirected five times since then, always getting closer to its premise, learning from other shows I make. The performance is based on Samuel Beckett's radioplay *Embers* (1957), which as I read it, centers on a man haunted by guilt and despair after the circumstances of his father's death. It all goes back to a childhood memory: when the protagonist refuses, for the first time, to obey his father, when he requests to go swimming – as an act of asserting his own will – his father calls him a “washout” and goes alone to the shore. Shortly afterward, the father possibly drowns, but definitely goes missing. From that point on, the man is tormented by the relentless sound of the sea in his ears – a poetic manifestation of guilt, memory, and inner turmoil. In an attempt to soften its presence, he begins to speak. Always, always speaking – until it alienates those around him. But more importantly for me, this compulsive speech can be conceived as the play itself. This idea is amplified by the fact that, in the radio play, the sound of the sea remains constantly audible beneath the actor's voice. If I were to stage this, it was immediately clear to me that I wouldn't replicate the radio medium's defining trait – sound – but would instead transpose it into the theatrical space by rendering the performative gesture as *silence*³². A haunting silence, an absence that surrounds the protagonist and compels them to speak. The silence of the theatre space itself.

The silence that started it all

When there's silence in the theatre space, a familiar tension begins to arise, similarly to the discomfort felt when a conversation runs out of topics. It's an awkward, uneasy energy that compels participants to search for something – anything – to fill the void: checking phones, rolling a cigarette, grabbing a beer, tapping fingers, staring into space, humming. This was the foundation of our performance: how the performers perform, do things *by* and because of the silence, obeying to the tension to propel the show forward. This basically requires the performer not to hide but to use and cultivate *stage-fright*. Not to face the everchanging theatrical situation as a “professional” who knows how

³² A silence which happens.

things go, but adheres to the fact and develops a sensitivity towards that it's never the same, and that this is destabilizing or sometimes even paralyzing. This idea came to me as a gift. After a workshop presentation, one of the participants approached me saying: "You are clearly afraid of us, but you use it. It's really powerful. I wish I could do that. But I've learned not to be afraid of the audience anymore, and I don't know how to unlearn it." That short exchange changed everything for me. I had never thought of my inability to pretend as a strength. But from that moment on, it became central. This is the practice that 4:33 and the research itself builds on. During the rehearsals of the show, we interpreted the source of the tension as the gaze of the audience, which concept was further intensified by the premise of our adaptation: the audience could function as the gaze of the dead father: silent, unresponsive, judgmental. The protagonist performs *for* this gaze, seeking acceptance, propelled by the fact that their only point of relation to the situation is the father's rejection. This performance itself creates/is the drama.

Dramaturgy of the dasein

The dramaturgical arc – perhaps informed by my Buddhist upbringing and my fascination with Jerzy Grotowski and Martin Heidegger – explores how humans, when confronted with nothingness, begin to perform, animate, produce, and act in order to exist. Through repeated behaviors, they become characters, and eventually, representation closes this process – reducing *silence* to merely a pause. The performance began with an empty stage and natural sounds, and gradually evolved into a fully realized theatrical set, intertwined with technical mediation. I was – and still am – drawn to Grotowski's idea of *poor theatre*, particularly the notion that "theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion." (Grotowski 2002, 19) I initially misunderstood this as a call for a non-mediated space, which I now believe is misleading. Still, as a working principle, it remains invaluable: it places the performer's work at the center of the event, encourages a focus on *how* rather than *what*, and invites an analytical, hands-on approach to space – making it one's own. Our task was nothing less than to foreground the very space of the event itself – through the world and situation of the play, which aligns with our own situation as we stand before

the spectators. The premise was promising, but several “obstacles” slowed the piece’s “progress” – as is often the case in my performances. Having begun as an autodidact, I feel compelled to stage what seem like impossible undertakings.

Problems: the silence itself

We started by relentlessly reciting the text in order to avoid silence, negotiating even the need to take a breath. The problem with this approach, if our aim was to expose the very space through it, was double: First, there is meaning in the text. And if the spectator comes with no idea of what’s about to happen – but brings with them a classical understanding of theatre (as many tend to do, especially in Hungary) – they will try to make sense of it, this itself makes the effort for the space and event to appear rather complicated. The second issue, which I only realized much later, is that silence is not a concept. It happens. Focusing too heavily on the *idea* of silence can create the illusion that it’s something which is to be accessed solely through hearing – when in fact, this is not that simple. It is an embodied experience and just because the performer stops speaking, it does not mean silence has occurred. That’s merely conceptual silence, which cannot reach the spectator as something *there*.

Silence happens *after* someone stops talking – or the talking stops *because* silence happens. This becomes easy to grasp when we consider the actual theatrical space. Once the performer stops speaking, there’s first a pause. Only after several seconds (around ten) does that pause potentially shift into *silence*: a moment of not knowing what’s going to happen next, and simultaneously, why nothing *is* happening. But *silence* can also be what *halts* speech. In *Empty*. (the name of the show after the fifth redirection), for example, there is a moment of continuous speaking “against” the space (not against silence, which would be too conceptual and narrow – that was more the terrain of *4:33*). Here, the performer reaches a point where there is simply no possibility to continue. The construct, over-imposing itself onto the space, collapses. And what remains is the space itself – still, unyielding. It’s not a deliberate stop, not a director’s choice, but a collapse that comes because the effort has exhausted itself. The performance dies. And in that death, something lingers – a ghost, a trace of the failed attempt. This *silence* is very different from the one that emerges when a situation *empties out* – from a prolonged enough pause. It is a *filled* one, nevertheless foregrounds the space, if it is let

to linger, to breathe. All of this is to say: if silence is treated as a concept, and the performance offers no cues for how it should be read (such as suggesting that “meaning is unimportant”), then the audience is unlikely to find themselves within the *space* of the performance. They might instead become confused, annoyed, or – at best – absorbed not by the immanence of the moment, but by the postdramatic spectacle of it all. The realization that our understanding of silence is conceptual came to us on the day the third version premiered at a festival, where we only had one chance to rehearse in the actual performance space. In an attempt to settle ourselves, to arrive into the moment, I asked the group to walk around the space, to experience what silence is *there*. To sense how it propels, supports, and chokes meaning, as everything which has time to breathe as an occurrence will function as significant, as a world spurring element. We discovered that *silence* makes presence. From that moment on it was clear for us that it’s not enough to *know* silence is there. One needs to listen to it, to experience it. If this sounds a bit mystical, that’s not an accident. At the time, the group was very much Grotowskian – we treated the theatre space as sacred (which it is), and the performers as priests (which they kind of are), but even in that language, despite being overcharged and questionable, there was already something about *relationality*, about *perfor(m)ation*. It was just wrapped in problematic expressions which could lead to some kind of cult – rather than what it should be: people there to have fun in their spare time, and/or because they are getting paid, and/ or because they are friends, or wanting to be ones. A little exercise emerged from the observation in the festival which we continued in our training: taking a moment with the space before stepping on the dance mat (in our dimly lit stinky cellar it was a PVC floor over OSB panels).

Problems: the text

Another important realization came by accident: when the audience hasn’t read the text beforehand – as is almost always the case – they won’t register or appreciate how clever your staging solution is. Unless you’re working with something universally known like *Hamlet*, the ingenuity of your choices likely won’t be recognized. And with that came the realization: if the audience doesn’t know the original text, then I’m under no real obligation to treat it with reverence, once if my aim is not to stage Beckett’s “original” intentions. Instead, I can use the text to create my own performance, freely adding material that helps the spectator find their bearings. This realization came out of another

practical problem. I was trying to rework Beckett's radio play for the stage, as a performance with four actors instead of a solo, and with the events rearranged would never get past the Beckett Foundation, which is famously strict about staging Beckett *exactly* as written (in accordance with his own wishes). So to avoid copyright complications, I had to reconstruct the material, alter it so thoroughly that it was no longer the original text. And in doing that, I stumbled upon a very different relationship to the text, one that says: the text is not a monument, it is material.

Problems: the mise en scène

Another key aspect that prevented both me and the audience from arriving at a shared space in *4:33* was the way I misused the *mise-en-scène*. I was putting on stage what I wanted to see – what I imagined might “work” – instead of allowing what needed to be there. That the aesthetic of a piece can lead to misreading the intentions of the show or rather to outright confusion, only became clear to me through an audience member's question during a party after a show. When I had try to explain that we aimed to stage the space itself – the situation, the tension – she asked: “Then why are the performers already standing in a neat line when we first see them?” It was a simple but powerful observation. That tidy formation already suggested that a shaping force had acted on the performers *before* the audience entered. It erased the possibility that they might simply “be there,” that their presence could arise with the audience rather than be presented to them. On top of that, in our effort to remain “neutral,” we had the performers wear black training clothes. But this didn't create a blank canvas, it made them look professional, disciplined, even ghost-like. Definitely not like actual people.

Problems: defining ourselves

One of the biggest issues, however, was that the performers own understanding of themselves – and of their role in the performance – remained rather unclear. Our approach to this question was deeply shaped by the Grotowskian training we had been immersed in for years prior to the work on *4:33*. And while that training had immense value, it remained grounded in acting, enactment, and imitation. Grotowski's approach still empowered the actor to be “more” than everyday – to transcend. But if our aim was to perform (in) a shared space, then this wasn't the right direction. The sensitivity we were searching for required something else: not transcendence, but immanence. Not

more, but *exactly what is*. And by that I don't mean "the self," but the one who becomes, by being affected through rubbing the score to the relational space. It was clear that they were not characters, but we failed to account for the fact that the stage is an imaginative space. If it isn't treated carefully, the result is not neutrality, but a subtle kind of acting – the performers *acting* as though they are performers, *pretending* to just be there.

How they are there is something the performer must know, first and foremost. Whether that knowledge reaches the audience is secondary, though also important; but it does not work the other way around: if only the audience is affected. In 4:33, we didn't yet understand this. And interestingly, the gestures we thought would demonstrate "being in the same space" instead produced a kind of arrogance: the appearance of the performer-robot, who plays as if affected but in reality is merely repeating a choreographed score. A score that *shows* something (i.e., "look, we are here together") without actually generating it. And this, *showing* mentality precisely, destroyed the sharedness we were aiming for.

Moreover, while we believed we had understood *silence*, we still hadn't grasped how it *performs*. In 4:33, it was decided by the *mise-en-scène* and the performers (the actors performed it, and not the *silence* performed the actors). Apart from being fake, such practice created a problematic concept of "sensing": the belief that the performer must somehow intuit the exact moment something should happen. On the surface, this may seem like sensitivity: taking a moment, listening to the space. But if left uninterrogated, this idea can lead to a deeply harmful relationship with theatrical work. It opens the door to a logic of "authenticity" where performers feel they must *sense correctly*, and if they don't, they've somehow failed. This easily devolves into a form of actorly self-flagellation: a constant doubt about one's presence, timing, or openness. The problem isn't the desire to listen, but what gets attached to that desire. When sensing becomes a moral or aesthetic obligation, it stops creating *space* and starts to propel it into a closure.

Problems: the illusion of a non-mediated space

Another major obstacle we encountered was the structure of the work itself. It was constructed from a philosophical-conceptual framework rather than grounded in practical dramaturgical logic. In practice it meant that the piece assumed certain things it never properly examined. Most importantly: *there is no such thing as a non-mediated space*. This goes down to two key misassumptions:

The first is a persistent ghost in experimental theatre – the idea that one can create a "pure" or "unmediated" encounter by stripping away technical spectacle. The legacy of poor theatre, Grotowski's reorientation towards the performer rather than the spectacle remains crucial, but we failed to recognize that this "center" isn't a place of "origin" – it's already mediated. The idea that silence, minimalism, or the performers "presence" can remove mediation is itself a conceptual illusion. There is no such thing as an unmediated space. There is always a frame, even if that frame is the denial of the frame. The performer doesn't become central by stripping away layers of the spectacle, but by entering into a set of relations: with light, sound, movement, gaze, rhythm, and most of all, with others. This misunderstanding led to a problematic tendency in our earlier process: we assumed that if we removed enough, if we trained enough, if we purified the space and the performers' attention enough, we could arrive at some ontological truth of co-presence. But what we learned – only later, through trial, failure, and witnessing – is that presence is not about the absence of mediation, but about the quality of how mediation is handled. A performer can be utterly central while dancing to a Beyoncé track or lip-syncing a meme, as long as the *how* of their presence is opened to the encounter. The *what* matters far less than we thought.

The second problem – the twin illusion of the non-mediated space – is more subtle but equally problematic: the assumption that if the audience doesn't understand that we are "in the same space," it's their failure. That somehow, they are missing the point. But of course they *do* understand it. They know we are sharing the same room. What they're waiting to see is how the performance understands *itself*. And that's the actual dramaturgical task. The audience's behavior is shaped not by some lack of ontological clarity, but by how the work offers itself to be read. They interpret what is offered according to the logic the piece sets up. The question is whether we give them something to *enter*, something to *play with*. If the performance treats co-presence as a

self-evident truth, it quickly becomes a hollow assertion. If, on the other hand, it explores presence *as* a question – a mediated, glitchy, unstable process – then something can begin to happen. We must know what kind of readability we are proposing. Legibility does not need to mean prescribing meaning, but to acknowledge that *reading is part of the event*. To ignore this is not radical; it is lazy and disrespectful.

Here I'd like to present the structure of the last performed (fourth) version of 4:33 as each scene within it dealt with a slightly different challenge and carried a slightly different mistake in answering that challenge. The fourth version of the piece with the new text material became freer in interpreting our intentions, but given the fact that the process was done through redirections, the new versions always tried to solve the last ones issues, saving the scenes I liked, instead of rethink the whole concept and structure which then happened later with *Empty*. when the show finally arrived at successfully articulating its own intentions.

(Drumroll)

*Analysis of a performance: 4:33 – the fourth dip*³³

1. When the audience entered, the performers were already standing in a neat line by the door, requiring spectators to cross the stage and pass directly by them. This setup served multiple functions: it helped the performers prepare – having spent 10 minutes breathing, focusing, and attuning to the promise of the performance. They were already inhabiting the silence, holding the space of the “father’s” absence by negotiating the moment when the show was gonna roll. It also allowed them to observe the audience’s arrival, registering who is there already negotiating the affect of each spectator, how this will go, how they might react. This was, in many ways, a strong method of preparation. But it also carried risks. The performers could become tired or, worse, encased in an auratic shell – appearing too composed, too already-there, too “other” by the time the audience arrived. Similarly, seeing a line of powerful, readied bodies suggested something prepared and formal rather than people simply being there. These small shifts may

³³ The Hungarian word *merítés* (dipping something) has a dual meaning: it refers both to to an attempt – trying something out for the umpteenth time – and to the act of dipping underwater.

seem subtle, but they matter enormously when the goal is to render a shared, relational space.

2. After the audience had taken their seat the show continued by a prologue which was a new development coming from the realization of a very important aspect of the work of the director-dramaturg: that the audience (sadly) not them, watching themselves, the actual spectator wasn't attended the rehearsals and has no clue how to read the space, the piece they are arriving to. They must be invited to this realm. This is already the work of the tension between *re-presentation* and representation: the maker's ability to think absent-minded giving birth to the performance itself. It became evident that if we want to challenge representational thinking through the situation itself, we must begin with the world otherwise, the performance risks appearing nothing else than a strange, disconnected sequence of movements. We must offer a frame of the reading (this is not yet the realization for the need of clear policies).
3. After the prologue the stage suddenly gets dark, which was a clever poetic interpretation of the experience of sudden deprivation as death directly connected with the space itself. Although again it carries in itself potential faults, one can learn from. Not seeing the point of relation due to darkness, while having a false understanding of silence, toppled with the need to *sense*, can result that the performers will speak their lines in the dark – intended as responses to the provocation of darkness, as if asking “Is anybody there?” – when they *think* and not when it *can* be articulated, they are asserting control rather than listen to the space, which immediately makes the gesture *shown* other than shared.
4. In the next scene, the lights abruptly switch on to reveal the three performers standing in a neat row, continuing to deliver their lines as responses to the *silence* – a strategy that persists throughout the piece. The issue here lay in the aesthetic choice: the symmetry of the line, and the number three, offered the performers a sense of support, which reduced their vulnerability. When one began to move – eventually escalating into violent, exhaustive actions – it didn't compel the others to respond for real. The scene was also quite short, with text delivered during movement, which made the movement feel timed by the dialogue rather than

arising from necessity. Overall, it came off as artificial – at best, a skilled exercise in building tension, rather than an act *generated by* tension.

5. Next came the relentless text recitation, revealing our conceptual misunderstanding of *silence*. At one moment, it was about listening to the impulse to speak or move; at the next, it became a battle with *silence*, preventing listening from taking root. These were two very different approaches. However, I introduced a crucial element for establishing a shared space, a concept that fully developed later in *facingX*. A person sitting behind the performers – the storyteller, child, or host – decided when the scene would end by starting to sing. This external force threw the performers into the situation: apart from their acting they were already attending the event.
6. The next part revealed a key discovery: the *elements*. These were a set of predefined actions that the performers could repeat as needed, in an order decided spontaneously. This structure already carried the premise of emptying out – a deeper form of silence not defined by non-action. However, the scene still included some text that imposed a time frame, and the performers executed their actions simultaneously, each focused on their own task. Framed theatrically as their first encounter with these items, the scene suggested they were simply doing something – anything – to resist *silence*, which ultimately made it feel artificial.
7. Next came the most problematic part: the performers gathered all available props and began to interact and play with each other. While this was enjoyable in itself, the underlying premise – that they were playing to keep *silence* at bay – posed a core issue. Because the material was so tightly set, the fear of *silence* became something they had to act, not something they experienced. Knowing their next move in advance made any pause feel like an artificial decision, since the logic of the scene demanded constant continuation. This problem was only resolved later in *Empty*.
8. The next scene sometimes worked well, but when it didn't work, it revealed an essential lesson for the director-dramaturg: what works in performance space doesn't do so because it has been refined to perfection through instructions. In a

relational space, what works is what invites the performer to *play*: something concrete and comprehensible, yet open enough to allow freedom in the moment. Only the performer can know what's needed, *then and there*. In this scene, two performers sit and stir spoons in coffee cups while a third acts as the table. They try to keep up a conversation, clearly to avoid falling into *silence*. The stirring sound offers a shared rhythm, a humorous nod to Stanislavskian realism. But it only works if the elements – talking, drinking, placing and lifting the cup, gargling – are given as components to *play* with, not fixed in sequence. If both text and actions are rigidly set, the actors tend to follow instructions rather than explore the moment. Not out of laziness, but out of loyalty: “this is how the director wanted it.” This points to a central question in my research: how can the performer move from puppet to host?

The final scenes offered little in terms of new discoveries, aside from one key misstep: we left the space before the audience could clap, having already prompted them to applaud before the last scene. While this choice aligned conceptually with the piece, leaving them alone with the blaring gramophone, it came off as disrespectful. In a performance built on extended silences and the need for attentive presence in order to take effect, expecting the audience to care means we must also show that we care about them.

Winter-workshops – *nothing*

Rechristening the term

I applied to the University of Arts in Helsinki with these experiences behind my back, continuing the research on *silence*. I quickly came to a realization, that if I'm talking about the phenomenon as silence, people would understand it as a sonic occurrence, which led to the realization that it was not only that in the first place. Trying to interpret my experiences with 4.33 through workshops at Uniarts during the winter of 2023, *silence* gradually became equated with *nothingness*. Although people were genuinely engaged with the theme, there was a tendency to intellectualize and philosophize it rather than explore it through practice. To counter this, I reframed the term as: *nothing happens*. In the following sub-chapter there's an outline of some exercises from this period focusing on the development of relational thinking in my practice.

The sense of being watched

The foundation of the training, drawing from my past experiences, centered on cultivating a relationship with the tension coming from being watched (the reversed logic of stage appearance, one that embraces stage-fright). Treating the spectator gaze not simply as a terrifying, judging presence, but through these qualities rather as a force capable to bring oneself to existence with. I understood being in relation with this tension as being in relation with the possibility that nothing *can* happen, which became for me the core of live performance. That the unknown is always at bay, the *silence* can always settle.

Exercises: sculpting

A simple exercise emerged from this principle, called *sculpting*: one performer stands in front of the others and allows themselves to feel the tension of being looked at. They then slowly begin to move, sensing how their own body becomes visible to them through the audience's gaze. The hand becomes a signifier, not because of what it represents, but because it simply *is* – its presence amplified by the shared space and attention. The performer experiences this as a loop: they are performed by the situation (both in terms of coming into existence and generating movement). Whether these appearing images are 'real' or filled with self-judgment is "beside" the point. As long as they appear, they are welcomed material – something that can be worked with, recognized, shared. The performer begins to see these as part of a collective field – a shared space that coalesces between being seen and seeing oneself being seen. This reverses the understanding of performance as something one does. Here, performance is something one is caught in – something that happens through you while/by doing it. The power of the exercise lies in how it reframes vulnerability. Stage fright is not something to be overcome but something to be entered into as the very material of presence. And when treated as such, in a framework that allows for *play* with vulnerability, as in theatre, it can generate a new kind of visibility: not polished or confident, but exposed, raw, alive, and proud. A readiness to be affected and to affect in return.

Exercises: channeling

A natural continuation of this practice is an exercise called *channeling*. It retains the basic premise of *sculpting* – working with the tension of being watched – but pushes it further into movement and sound, exploring how the body and voice can become conduits for what passes through the space. The performer would begin in stillness, receiving the gaze, and then gradually allow sound and movement to emerge listening to the situation as it takes shape through them. While this task is fundamentally improvisatory, the logic is not one of choices or creative freedom – but of transparency. At the time I was particularly invested in the notion of organicity understood as responsiveness to necessity. What made *channeling* transformative was that it invited performers to experience their body not (only) as a source of meaning but as a threshold.

Exercises: mini-performances for foregrounding the space as shared

The final exercise of the initial training sessions involved creating mini-performances that foregrounded the space itself as a *condition* of appearance. It was crucial that the performers did not directly address the situation or the audience. Instead, they were asked to *act it out* – to let the space become perceptible through their actions, not by naming or framing it. The aim was not to create meta-theatre, but to activate a kind of embodied awareness, where the conditions of visibility and relation would be sensed not stated. This resistance to imposed interaction took inspiration from 4:33, where the audience were the *dead*, which choice I realize, stemmed from the desire to make direct connection structurally impossible. Not because I was interested in alienation per se, but because I wanted to stage the absence that conditions *any* relation. In this framework, addressing the audience directly in order to foreground the situation would paradoxically make this foregrounding impossible, as relationality would conceal itself in the act of addressing it. Hence the performance must allow this realization to *arrive*, rather than be handed over or announced. However, during the winter workshops, the limits of this approach quickly surfaced. A tendency emerged in which performers began to enjoy the asymmetry of power their position afforded. They delighted in “fucking with” the audience – creating moments of discomfort or opacity that reinforced their own control. The audience was acknowledged only to be excluded,

made to feel unnecessary. And yet, paradoxically, the performers were entirely dependent on the audience's presence – giving back little more than a middle finger. While this may prove that a space exists, it does not make that space livable or compelling, and certainly doesn't invite care. This was a crucial realization: foregrounding only becomes meaningful when the performer is also *inside* the experience – when they, too, are being affected, transformed, and unsettled. Without this, the event becomes a closed loop of self-satisfaction. A stage for display, not for relation.

Doing instead of acting: Brzezinka

During the autumn of 2023, I traveled with a few colleagues to a private residency with Jairo Cuesta – one of Grotowski's closest collaborators – in Brzezinka, the site where Grotowski continued his work after the theatrical production phase of his career. There, we became familiar with Grotowski's turn from acting to *doing*, and what particularly struck me was the premise that a performer can, simultaneously, act and observe themselves acting – echoing Grotowski's image of the two birds, one doing, the other watching. This resembles the logic of meditation, where one learns to witness their own thoughts passing like clouds across the sky, while they remain aware of the "sky" as well. What I only fully realized while writing this thesis is that this "double awareness" is not merely a skill or internal state one arrives at. Rather, it is deeply tied to the *presence of an audience* – even if the audience is absent. It is the *possibility* of being seen that opens this space of awareness. Shifting the focus on *doing* was a crucial step to reconsider the difference between *acting* as someone in a space, or "actually" being *in* it.³⁴

Exercises: softening

The encounter with *doing* brought many changes in the work. During the workshops we started to introduce the practice called *softening*. It was about taking fifteen minutes in the beginning of the workshops to just be and observe one's doing, to listen to the space, to see how the space transforms through this "non-exercise", how the elements of the space (performers, light, dust, sounds, temperature etc.) react and organize

³⁴ By means of negotiating one's presence/absence. Which allows to reconsider what presence means in performance, and how awareness is not something sealed within the performer, but co-created through the relational conditions of the space. But this I only realized writing this thesis.

themselves. To be in the action, while simultaneously being out of it, with the help of *silence* which then allows for sound and movement to rise. This is already partly abandoning my Grotowskian heritage and the exercises stemmed from it, realizing how training is not disarming but rather taming, and the bodies to be *arrive* to the space not necessarily need to do *those* exercises and in that exact order; training as taming can violently shape bodies in an “unnatural way” which does not fosters togetherness rather establishes the reign of the director because someone can do less great than other during these exercises and the measure of how good one performs is solely the determined by the director’s gaze, taste and mood. However, completely abandoning the form was not the right decision either (see my thoughts about training on page 21-22).

The concept of disconnection

Moreover, the encounter with the Grotowskian heritage led the research toward a search for disconnection *as* a path to connection. Grotowski articulates this in his text: “Tu es le fils de quelqu’un” (1985): “Looking for connection, one should begin with disconnection.” (Grotowski 1997, 297) Embracing this approach was not simply a solution to avoid arrogance – shifting the focus toward *doing* and staying within the tension – but emerged from a deeper discomfort with the ideology of “connection” that dominates many interactive performances and workshops. This discomfort was already present in my effort to conceptualize the audience in 4:33 as someone dead, and in my refusal to directly address the situation of the performances during the winter workshops. It took time to articulate what exactly felt so wrong with it. Part of it, admittedly, is that I simply don’t enjoy experiencing such a situation. But more importantly, these interactions often presume that *connection* is good by default – without attending to *how* that connection is produced. They conceal their own coercion in the name of relationality, demanding a kind of immediate intimacy, an unearned proximity, rather than offering conditions under which these could emerge. In this way, they confuse gesture for relationship. Especially in theatre, this becomes violent: the performance depends on the audience’s participation, and so the audience must be *handled* into participating. This produces a form of listening that pretends to be “authentic”, but functions more like capitalist extraction – harvesting attention, emotion, or presence for the sake of the performance. Even more troubling is how performers often use these tactics to render themselves “equal” to the audience. This

move – stripping away the fictionality of performance to meet the viewer “as a human” – feels dangerously false. It dissolves the very friction that defines theatre as a relational event. By pulling everything into the realm of non-fiction, of realness, of mutuality, forecloses the possibility for spectators and performers to be *there*, by existing through *their own respective ways* specific for the encounter.³⁵

But thinking through disconnection proved to be just as much a wrong path, as it reproduced the very violence I wanted to avoid. Asking people *not* to connect, can result in them withdrawing from the sensibility of the relationality of space. Which since is impossible, results in a performance which feels “fake” and forced, somewhat cultish. The task is rather about developing a relationship with the tension as the base of the work, and once one carrying this relation within themselves it allows any kind of connection, conscious or accidental.

Reciprocity

During the practice of *softening*, we observed a striking phenomenon: when the performers stopped caring about whether they were “connected” while moving through the space – when they no longer searched for connection – their movements began to align almost miraculously. Without trying to synchronize, a kind of coherence emerged. Even the audience’s squirming – which happens when the policy of a situation isn’t clear enough to hold togetherness – suddenly became part of the dance. It all belonged. I called this *reciprocity*, which can be understood as a forerunner of *relationality*. And while I still find it a generative and compelling premise, I now see how problematic it can be when taken for granted. Reciprocity, as I initially understood it, asks for a kind of organicity and relentless “truth.” It operates under the speculative belief that what the movement of the performers I witnessed is a *perfect* dance, rather than simply something *perceived* as such – perhaps by me alone. Calling it *reciprocity* instead of *relationality* imposed an ideal of balance that provided little room to play and to keep ideology at bay. It invited surrender, but not necessarily *becoming*. In contrast,

³⁵ This is obviously not this simple. There are many reasons why a performance might want to interact with its audience – and in the context of workshops, especially short ones, there’s often neither the time nor the ground or might even the need to develop meaningful connection. Moreover “meaningful” can mean very different things to different people. If the quality of performing is not the question – since the workshop leader has just met these people, has no real relationship with them, and is not planning to work with them long-term – then what does it even mean to judge the “depth” of the encounter?

relationality does not work as an imperative to feel or sense something specific – it draws its power from the continuous negotiation of that imperative. It holds space for ambiguity and asymmetry. It is not about alignment per se, but about attending to the friction, to the ever-shifting dynamics of *with* which makes live performances interesting and alive.

Reading the space through *reciprocity* gave birth to the expression: *being with*³⁶. The phrase emerged intuitively, as a way to name the distinction between *being for* – performing toward or on behalf of someone – and *being with* – performing alongside, exposed to the space without seeking to control it, or if so, making this control transparent. It was a direct response to the question of how to formulate a practice that could resist arrogance: one that could foreground reciprocity as the condition of a shared space, without collapsing into self-display or false humility. It was problematic but it was a start.

facingX – being-with and temporality

The premise

Drawing from these past experiences, with a group of international artists we created the show *facingX* an anti-musical on temporality, as a prototype of the dramaturgy of *being-with*. The premise of the show was to explore how music or even sound immediately brings in representation and an associative field even if the dancers doing the same movement as they did before in the silence, and also how sudden *silence* makes an image, an association crumble similarly to the feeling of having the carpet pulled out under someone's feet. The show proved to be great, which prevented me from seeing that the axioms of the research – especially those concerning silence, address, and presence – are narrow and binding. Not having a plot about a dead father (which was the case with *4:33*), we no longer needed to conceptualize the tension as something existing solely between spectator and performer. This allowed us to think about the spectator as a being and not simply as a force to challenge, and the silence not only as a dramaturgical tool, but as a *condition* which surrounds all of us, resulting in a

³⁶ At the time, I had not yet encountered Jean-Luc Nancy's formulation of *being-with* as singular-plural, so I wasn't aware of the term philosophical double bind, which would've helped me to not to drive the research into a closure.

deeper understanding of the phenomena. Such a turn framed the show as it is about extinction, our coming nothingness, the void which is already lingering around our little box of life, shifting my understanding of being in relation with the possibility that nothing *can* happen, to being in relation with one's own *temporality*, how the knowledge of our finitude fosters our being-together in the performance space.

Being-with as dramaturgical tool

The dramaturgy of *being-with* (in the context of *facingX*) carefully considered the experiences of *4:33* the following ways:

1. We avoided predesigned aesthetics or rigid placement of performers in the space. Black garments were abandoned; instead, we used costumes to *show* the kind of performativity we were looking for. The goal was not invisibility, but a visibility to resist hierarchy.
2. Scene durations were not predetermined. The show unfolded through live cues – sounds and light signals controlled by the choreographer and me – requiring performers to attend to the situation rather than pretend by performing pre-learned rhythms. This meant that any surprise for the audience had to be a surprise for the performers as well. Like in *4:33*, they were thrown into the gaze of the audience with nothing but time to fill – confronted with the responsibility to *do something*.
3. The choreography emerged from ordinary actions, – where we implemented the concept of *elements* – such as: sitting, standing, moving with a chair. These formed the initial score, abstract in silence but becoming a beautiful dance with music. The idea was that the audience should feel: “I could do this too.” This gesture of accessibility helped maintain the premise of a shared space – an ongoing *being-with*.
4. Performers began the show waiting with the spectators in the lobby, then they sat among the audience, and when not on stage, they returned to the same seats. This allowed them to witness and appreciate one another's work – not only as

co-performers but as co-spectators – reinforcing the horizontal quality of the space.

5. Text was introduced as a *layer* only when movement and variation began to exhaust themselves.
6. Another aspect of *being-with* was explored through the contrast between the professional actor – who was the host as the character of the janitor of the venue – and the “non-professional” dancers. This difference played out both in performativity and in the types of movement each performed. The janitor character danced in a way that was overtly performative, even virtuosic – something clearly recognizable as “dance.” In contrast, the non-professionals mostly engaged in elemental chair-based movements. This contrast was aimed at emphasizing the feeling of being in a theatre space.
7. The show also featured moments of light audience interaction, in a way to explore alternatives that could emerge precisely from the rejection of the performer’s gesture. For example, at one point, a dancer asks a spectator to dance with him. If the spectator accepts, they dance together – the beauty of the scene resting in that shared moment. But if the offer is declined, the performer begins to waltz alone, not simply miming an imaginary partner – which could feel slightly aggressive or mocking – but by interrogating the situation for himself during it, which eventually leads to my entrance with a bucket giving him to dance with.

In *facingX* we experimented with three types of *being-with*:

- *First the thrown*: fighting with nothingness by using the technique of *elements*, having the duration of the scene controlled from outside by light and sound.
- *Second*: the *sharings* - solos of the performers created themselves from material they wanted to share with the audience. It was their opportunity to shine, to be brave, to connect.
- *Third*: working with strictly *set material*, which keeps the performers in a movement loop until they collapse. As the score was repeated again and again,

the performers started to make mistakes, while kept going on. The quality of *still fighting* rendered the space as shared.

All of these elements were vital in establishing a shared space, but the most important discovery was the performers freedom of gaze. This meant they could look wherever they wanted – their gaze was not bound to the logic of the score. Equally essential was that the group trusted one another which allowed them to listen, something made possible by understanding silence not as a gap between performer and spectator, but as a *condition* surrounding all of us. I now believe that these two aspects – free gaze and trust within the group – are the most crucial tools for cultivating the capacity to interrogate one’s *becoming(s)*.

We felt that *being-with* is a good concept to continue the research with, as it is definitely capable of stripping away the possibility to be arrogant, although it also falls into a false premise not allowing the performer to be *for* the audience. Moreover, thinking of the two “sides” of the performative encounter as equals is ultimately false. We only realized these during a residency at the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw titled: *essays on being-with*, where a group of international artists and I created a presentation as a way to explore different forms of *being-with* and to develop a dramaturgical arc that establishes a shared space. During the residency we watched the recording of *4:33* and decided to remake the show, which became *Empty*. the fifth version of *4:33*.

Empty. – *emptiness*

The practical application of our understanding of silence and the shared space

Empty. is the second most important result of the research after *I:AM Momo*, where everything began and to which everything ultimately returned. Like *4:33*, it explores the real-time falling of the “authentic” *dasein* into “*the they*” self, brought on by an experience of nothingness. With my Hungarian group we created the show in eight days, but by then we were experienced enough that the process wasn’t difficult. Five years of research was distilled into those eight days.

The show operates with a better understanding of *being-with* that is letting everybody exist in their own ways in the space, which does not mean that the performers cannot connect to the audience but they do by their own freedom provided by the structure since they are the hosts of.

By this time it became very clear: the goal is not to prevent silence as a sonic event, but to prevent or deal with the *feeling* that the scene or space has *emptied out*. This leads to a crucial reformulation: performers must act not when silence feels unbearable, nor when they believe the audience can no longer bear it, but when a new impulse is *needed*. This isn't about perfect sensing; it's about negotiation in a relational space: by the self through the character (the form which allows for friction, foregrounding relationality – a form which is always “occurs” when one is being looked at), and with the audience. The “father” is no longer the audience's gaze; attention becomes a *gift* that helps the performer confronting their own absence – an absence that is made present through relationality.. The elements on stage are kept simple so that performers can truly listen to the space and to each other, offering room for a processual *becoming* – always returning to a shared reality (of the “empty” space), rooted in relationality, rather than escaping into the performer's or director's isolated imagination.

Understanding that several performer on the stage at the same time does not create struggle, we reorganized the logic of how the performers attend to the piece. Drawing from *facingX* we realized that the performers sitting with the audience watching their partners trying is actually paramount for the original show (4:33) of the research. First, it creates solidarity and trust: witnessing effort and bravery encourages care and attention within the group. Second, it sharpens perception: sitting “outside” the performance helps performers intuit when a new impulse is needed, cultivating a sense of shared space. And the frequent transitions between audience and stage roles helps in cultivating a shared space. But this only works if performers remain *open* – an enclosed, internalized performance is a lost opportunity.

We created a dramaturgical structure built on *elements* and *layering*, even within scene progression, creating a clear logic, instead of the one featured in 4:33. Each scene contains a set of possible actions and a dramaturgy of different energy levels, offering

an internal logic for when and why something changes. While the performers can collectively decide when a moment has reached completion, the larger scenical progression is carried forward by the interventions of the storyteller, who also follows the logic of layering – adding a new impulse when necessary, keeping the space alive. She is no longer sitting behind, but she is the host character who operates the lights, sound, and set. It is her story – or more precisely, her situation.

Once the illusion of a non-mediated space was abandoned, we realized that *silence* doesn't just occur – it must be *created*. If a performance simply begins in silence, it risks being mistaken for delay, or – if the silence is too long – may lose the audience's attention. Silence must be shaped, crafted so that the spectator *experiences* the protagonist's descent into it. Without that, there's no *silence* – only waiting.

The performer's not wearing black anymore as neutral, but they wear simple costumes which expresses the show's world: they wear shorts and small T-shirts, and a towel, like a kid left forgotten in a sandbox, or at the beach.

We erased the text everywhere where it could not work as an *element*, texture, or something to *play* with. The texts selected spoke directly to the situation though in a poetic way inviting the audience to see *through* them, not around them, as they no longer need to think why this and this text is here.

Perhaps most important of all: although I directed it, the show premiered without me. The performers organized everything around the premiere themselves. It became *their* show. This feels crucial to me now: in a truly shared space, the director must be “killed.” He/she can still serve as an outside eye, but not as an authority. The performers may consider the director's insights, but the show is theirs – until they collectively decide to revise it.

Let me again list the scenes of the show, as each of them features a different challenge regarding the research:

(Drumroll)

*Analysis of a performance: Empty. – Ode to the one who lost
their inner compass*

1. Performers are already in the lobby with the audience in their costume – awkward yet intentional presences. They are simultaneously a part of and apart from the audience. The audience enters the space and everything settles.
2. The protagonist gets introduced: 20th Century Fox fanfare plays, the curtain rises to reveal... the empty space. It's a comic and essential gesture, which holds the very premise of the show. The curtains go down.
3. They go up again revealing a water kettle on a table. The kettle gets turned on remotely. As the water in the kettle boils up, the sound of the scene *creates* the surrounding *silence* and attention to the space which will be the material for the show. When the *silence* settles after the *click* of the kettle, the storyteller enters and the prologue takes place.
4. After the prologue, the curtain falls again. The second performer is introduced in a similar way as the space was: the curtain rises, the music cuts out, and a performer stands in their ridiculous outfit in the bare space. After this reveal, the others enter, respecting their colleague's process, and sit among the audience like in a cinema. This first scene functions as a warm-up for the performers but also fits within the larger structure and energy of the story and the show. During this moment, performers encounter the space as it *is* here and now. Movement emerges when they feel it's necessary. According to the story, this is the moment when the protagonist are thrown into the world as a new birth by encountering the *silence* after his father's death. When a performer cannot offer anymore alone for the *gaze*, they move out from the space, and when the empty stage calls a new impulse, another performer tries the "same" way.
5. When all performers are tuned in, and the space emptied out, the storyteller brings in a chair – a point of relation. The performers enter the space in a layered way: the first one sits, and when that empties, the second enters, walking around in circles. When that empties out, the third begins to speak, and then the

movement and actions – standing up, sitting down, and moving among the audience – come into play. This simple set of possibilities offers the performers the freedom to build and elevate the “scene” while listening to the space. When the performers feel they can no longer sustain the intensity, they return to their places. *Silence* reigns again.

6. As the empty space demands a new impulse, the storyteller brings in a brightly colored towel – introducing color into a previously neutral space. Each performer has five lines, and some action such as – sitting, standing, walking, laying down, putting the towel on one's head etc. – some of the lines are directly connected with certain actions. This results in a strange oscillation between fiction and non-fiction while *both* of them collapsing, as the performers must interrogate their own *becoming(s)* continuously, trying to build and inhabit worlds with their actions, listening carefully to the space, adjusting constellations of meaning when they no longer resonate. For instance, one constellation can be: one performer may stand on a chair, while another circles around with the towel as a wig, and a third lies on the floor, saying, “washout!” Every movement, direction of gaze resonates in the space altering the meaning of the scene. The storyteller, meanwhile, builds the scenery around them. It is a world which shutters because it gets built.

7. The next scene is the spoon stirring-talking scene from 4:33, where one of the performers serves as a table. I already analyzed the scene, but I cannot highlight enough the importance of *elemental* thinking instead of directorial control, as this scene only works if the performers *play* with it. The stirring with the spoon is the basic gesture of the scene, but this does not mean that it needs to be always there, similarly the performers don't only need to say their lines when they feel that the scene is boring, it is a manner of negotiation, of “*is this going well?*” Just like in a real situation. Here the “natural” acting and the obviously fake blends and the participants of the scene must self-dramaturg and self direct themselves with the elements they have. External directing here immediately shows and either confuses the spectator or it makes the show *artistic*. Instead of making it both artificial and real, just like our lives.

8. After this scene comes the interruption, during one of the actors screams into a basin of water kneeling at the front of the stage. This is also done negotiatively: This is not about creating a shared space against entertainment, but through it.
9. The show finishes with the theatre scene from 4:33, where – at the end – the music becomes incredibly loud. Here, the acting method shifts. The performers no longer negotiate the tension in the space; instead, they focus inward, attending to the tensions of the world within the piece. Having spent the performance navigating relational dynamics, they now cut away from them, performing as it is the easiest: out of habit. Paradoxically, this habitual mode is precisely what brings the scene alive, as it provides contrast. We decided that if the audience claps the performers can bow in the end.

I:AM Momo – per-for(m)ation

The limiting nature of the axioms of the research

Overall, the idea that nothingness could be the central ingredient for foregrounding reciprocity is intriguing, but ultimately limiting. First, because nothingness as the source of tension should not be understood merely as negativity, but rather as the presence of an always-affirmative force that forces the self to negotiate its own absence: relationality. Second, this relationality is not the same as reciprocity, as it simultaneously entails freedom of choice while being shaped by one's context, leading to the very negotiation described above. The main reason I did not realize this, because the main focus of my research was *Empty*. (formerly 4:33), which built on the foregrounding power of absence and nothingness. In fact, after the failed attempt of *_Static_!* a walk-in performance about nothingness – which was about expanding the “authentic” squirming of the audience I had previously framed musically in *facingX*, into a full spatial choreography – I became so disinterested in the research on *nothingness* that before *I:AM Momo*, I considered abandoning it altogether.

But the process of *Momo* highlighted a simple yet crucial aspect I had overlooked: the tension I had previously understood as coming from the need to perform was also tied to the *desire* to perform. The performer engages the tension between the vulnerability of

being looked at *and* the chance of self-expression, in order to establish relationality as the foundation of the work. This shift in understanding of the tension opened space for *play*, and led to the development of the concept of *per-for(m)ation* as a means to negotiate one's absence. This allowed me to reckon with the Grotowskian spectre of organicity and the imperative of *sensing*, as well as my insistence on making pieces about silence and nothingness. It marked a turning point: from performing absence to negotiating presence. The interrogation of *how* I am in the space granted by the gaze of the audience, which was the last post of my directorial presence opening a way to be a dramaturg but with the power of having the last word in a process.

This also gains a better understanding of Heidegger's *dasein*: ungroundedness not only *makes* one exist, but also grants a *chance to be*. Understanding nothingness as relationality creates space for imitation and/as *becoming*. We've found that working *against* character often resulted in exactly what we aimed to avoid: the actor becomes a kind of robot, stripped of live friction and the need to negotiate in the moment. That's why it's crucial *not* to resist imitation itself. The real problem lies in *pretending* – in reasserting sameness, following a pre-set plan that ignores the relational dynamics of the space. A crucial moment led to this realization when during the rehearsals of *Momo*, Kadence Neill the choreographer of the piece said to the group during an observation round: "The associations, images, and situations that come to you as you inhabit the sets are also part of the space, part of the material you're working with. They're personal and belong to that exact moment in time: they are real in the sense that they are *really* happening."

The premise of the show

I:AM Momo become a piece that explores *becoming* through (the "technique" of) *per-for(m)ation*. The show is about constructing sets in real time, in front of the audience, driven by the need for a new impulse. The performers then try to inhabit the emerging space, using actions specific to that room as *elements*. The work is about *per-for(m)ating* the situation: knowing that if I fail to inhabit a space – if it empties out – my colleagues will dismantle it and build a new room, a new scene. The performers understand the show as a shared whole, where the best choice is not to shine at the expense of others, but to keep the performance alive *through* and *with* them. This

creates a kind of mutual support, where each performer can focus on their own process and negotiation as well on the whole unfolding of the performance. Our keywords I said to the group before every performance were: support, play, and enjoy. Because the time on stage is always unknown but certainly limited, performers hold it precious as a chance to exist precisely due to its certain ending.

The transpormative experiences of a rehearsal process I had not wanted to do

The process began with a question: why should I create a new piece at Uniarts, other than simply because I have to? What could I explore that I haven't yet? I realized I had never directed a theatrical piece in the traditional sense. All my previous works were performances or rituals where the performers were constantly visible, always on stage. I had never used *backstage*. This realization came during a FaceTime call with my partner, when she started playfully hiding herself and her toothbrush behind the bathroom sink, making it peek out and disappear again. I was mesmerized by this simple game of appearance and disappearance. It reminded me of a moment from childhood – playing with my baby cousin: “I’m here... I’m not here... aaaand I’m here!” I began to wonder: what is it about disappearance that’s so profoundly captivating? It reminded me of Heidegger’s question – which is the underlying constitutive of *being(s)*: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” In that tiny act I felt that the question which makes *being*, is *there*, captivating the viewer in a profound embodied way, one could even say it *makes* the audience, because this question is *never* resolved. There it was: what theatre could mean for me: using the backstage, creating scenes through the interplay of appearance and disappearance, where the scenes themselves are about being in negotiation when one needs to leave and when one needs to appear. The fragility of the image, and the performer as a living being subjected to it.

Another thing I knew before we began rehearsals was that I wanted the scenes to be processual, making it obvious to the audience that the world is made. Still, once everything is in place, it should be no less effective, allowing the spectator to experience *how* they are effected. This applies not only to the assembly, disassembly, and negotiation within the scenes but also to the light and sound. I already knew I wanted the composer to sit at the piano right next to the scene, so the audience can both

see and *feel* how the music helps to build the world, much like how we used music in *facingX*. The lighting will also shift on stage, like in a movie set but with an actual audience present, and no camera in sight.

When we started the rehearsals as a usual case when one's working with a relational space and actual people, all the ideas except the core needed to be thrown out, in order to engage the premise of the performance – time in contemporary industrialized art-making and society – together. As an autodidact unfamiliar with institutional structures, I felt thrown into a grinder – like when I had to decide on audience seating the moment I entered the space. People demanded answers I refuse to have. It was stressful, but from another perspective it perfectly aligned with the show's theme: how to build and sustain friendships and make something meaningful (at least for us) when time is limited. Channeling my anger and a persistent, harmful feeling of being chased – a sensation that accompanied me throughout the entire program – I decided that the performers would run. The hasty seating decision allowed us to use both doors, and with the show's focus on time, appearance, and disappearance, running in circles became a way to build and dismantle the scenes. The running was not just due to my own frustration, the show explored the real-time demand for new impulses, a constant negotiation of the next step in order to keep the show *running*. We worked in the same white, gallery-like space I had used in 2023 for the winter workshops. Its sterile hostility, combined with the improvised audience layout, inspired the idea of coloring: the space needed colors, and that became the main dramaturgical force of the show.

Once we were in the space, we began by exploring the feeling of what it means to appear. Running in circles between the backstage and the performance area, we tuned into the sensation of always arriving somewhere slightly new – where one must adjust immediately, because preparation is impossible. Just as importantly, we explored how to use this flicker of time not only to adjust, but to articulate and share (oneself) before disappearing. We built the process around this same logic, simply adding tasks to do before vanishing: following the ontological imperative in practice that once the reason for being there (such as placing a plant) is gone, the possibility of articulating that "I was there" also ends – and one must leave.

For a long time, I had wanted to incorporate sharings into the piece. I began thinking about how we could use our time and this space meaningfully – I was interested in creating a show that mattered to those involved, perhaps because I felt it didn't matter to me. I also wanted to justify repeating the event, which led to the idea that each performer could have a moment to step onto the stage and share something important to them – using the opportunity to be seen by thirty people (multiplied by the number of shows). To give the performers enough time to master the structure, I postponed the sharings until the last week of rehearsals. This delay allowed us to realize that the sharings were already embedded in the show. To include them as a distinct statement would have actually diminished their power. The whole structure turned out to function like a grinder – as a way of mirroring my personal feelings – constantly repeating itself – and it was precisely this repetition that gave performers the opportunity to choose whether to submit to the score or use it as a chance for self-expression. For example, the next time a performer might turn around before putting down the plant, or delay placing it altogether. These may seem like small choices, but in theatre, such acts of choosing one's freedom over automatic repetition are like explosions that foreground the shared space. They are ways of interrogating one's *becoming(s)* and choosing to do things differently. This is Heideggerian thinking in practice: time becomes the antagonist, threatening to evoke the "*they-self*", but also offering a moment in which appearing and becoming visible truly matter.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored how the collapse of traditional metaphysical boundaries necessitates a reconsideration of (theatrical) presence as *negotiation*, the *Epic gesture* as a mutual effort – between the performer, the audience, and the environment – and imitation as *becoming*. Through the concepts of *per-for(m)ation* as the negotiation of one's absence/presence, I have proposed a theatre focused on cultivating spaces where relational presence can emerge through the tension between *re-presentation* and representation, *realizing* (as recognition and creation), *figuring out* (as making and finding) our realities, which are processual, co-created, and very real.

The condition of consciousness amidst *the collapse* is best understood as *be()longing* for/to something *still*.³⁷ *Be()longing* refers to the desire for acceptance, to be part of something: *to belong* – to the shared space of the theatrical event, the play, a character, or oneself. At the same time, it implies a *longing* for that very space, play, character, or self. This dual movement unfolds within a relationality that simultaneously withholds and offers these possibilities, emerging from a crisis of formulas in *a/the* space. When understood as a whole, *belonging* also carries the Heideggerian sense of *being-in-the-world*, a fundamental condition of existence. It represents the desire to be there, to *presence* oneself, especially when faced with one's own absence. While the word “still” implies a fixed position, it also points to something beyond: something *still* –always more.

Be()longing is a *sympoiesis*, as feminist and posthuman theorist Donna Haraway puts it: “Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means ‘making-with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer ‘world game,’ earthlings are never alone. [...] It is a word for worlding-with, in company.” (Haraway 2016, 58) Haraway reveals that the expression was borrowed from “M. Beth Dempster’s Master of Environmental Studies thesis written in 1998,” where Dempster identified the

³⁷ This formulation perfectly captures the metamodern condition as conceptualized by curators Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, and as articulated by scholar Luke Turner in his article on the subject: “metamodernism considers that our era is characterised by an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism. [...] The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other.” (Luke Turner 2015)

term as standing for “collectively producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries.” (quoted by Haraway 2016, 33) Yet it is precisely this absence of fixed boundaries that is *at issue*. Read through the lenses of *per-for(m)ation*, the *poesis* part of Haraway’s formulation must be understood in a Heideggerian way: as measuring absence, which *is* dwelling, while makes dwelling possible. “The poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed as that which conceals itself” (Heidegger 1971, 225, *emphasis added*). Where absence – phenomenologically: death – through the lens of *be()longing* must be understood as (“pure”) relationality: the *being-in-the-world* as *with* itself. *Dasein* is not a director anymore – perhaps never was – but a dramaturg.

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