

Heiner Goebbels, Artist-in-Residence, Cornell University

“Aesthetics of Absence:

Questioning Basic Assumptions in Performing Arts”

Cornell Lecture on Contemporary Aesthetics (9 March 2010)

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I could easily show you a fifty-minute video of one of my recent works, a performative installation without any performer (“Stifters Dinge”), then go away, and the topic of absence would be well covered. But maybe we should reflect instead on how this topic has developed over the years in my works in order to understand better what happens and what I mean by “absence.”

How did it all start? Maybe with an accident in 1993 during rehearsals of a scene from a piece called “Ou bien le débarquement désastreux” (*Or the hapless landing*), one of my earliest music-theatre plays, with five musicians and one actor.



Ou bien le débarquement désastreux

Photo Credit: Dominik Mentzos

Magdalena Jetelova, a highly renowned artist from Prague, created the stage: a gigantic aluminum pyramid that hangs upside down, has sand running out of it, and can be completely inverted during the show, and a giant wall of silk hair, driven smoothly by fifty fans behind it (which also drove the actor crazy). In one scene the actor disappears behind the wall of hair, in another he is sucked in completely by the hanging pyramid and then comes back, minutes later, head first. After the rehearsal of these scenes Magdalena Jetelova went directly to the actor, André Wilms, and enthusiastically told him: “It is absolutely fantastic when you disappear.”

This is definitely something you should never say to an actor, and this one became so furious that I had to ask the set designer kindly not to visit any more rehearsals. But far more interesting is the intuitive grasp with

which she was able to question in an instant - from her point of view as a visual artist - a very important condition in performing arts.

For despite some radical (and later ignored) experiments by the theatrical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century (including plays by Gertrude Stein and approaches by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Adolphe Appia, and many other artists), and despite the intriguing experiments by American artists such as Bob Wilson, Richard Schechner, Richard Foreman, and others in the 1960s and 1970s who proposed a performance-oriented theatre against the intimidating authority and gravity of texts – despite all that: *theatre* and *opera* are still widely based on the classic concept of the artistic experience in terms of direct presence and personal intensity, a centralized focus on expressive protagonists (actors, singers, dancers, and instrumentalists): secure soloists – secure in their roles, figures, and bodies.

Among all performing arts contemporary *dance* alone has been raising questions of subject and identity, and translating them into a choreography of a fragmented, de-located, unfinished, deformed, or disappearing body since the 1980s. (See Gerald Siegmund's *Abwesenheit*, a study of absence as a performative aesthetics of dance.) Theatre and opera refuse to consider their classic assumptions. Occasionally they will change the text of a play, sometimes they change the sound of an opera, but never more than this. And speaking as someone who knows the gravity of educational institutions for actors and directors, I can reassure you this will go on for a while....

What was just a short moment in “Ou bien le débarquement désastreux” and an anecdote from this production became a crucial aspect for my work.

In this piece the moment of presence is already divided. The actor has to share it and accept sharing it with all the elements involved and produced

by the reality of the set (which is not illustrative decor but itself a piece of art): the confrontation between text and music, the separation between the voice and the body of the actor, the sudden clash between one music and another (music by two *griots* from Senegal and my own music performed by trombone, keyboards, and electric guitar), the clash between one scene and another. Between these “separate elements,” as Brecht put it, distances occur, blank spaces for the spectator’s imagination.

In his “Notes on the Antigone” Friedrich Hölderlin already stressed a “poetic logic” regarding theatre, a poetic logic that for him, unlike analytical or philosophical “logic,” lays claim to many of our perceptive abilities. He talks about “various successions in which idea and feeling and reflection develop, according to poetic logic,” which appeals to the most varied senses and modes of perception - and does not follow a linear narrative form. For Hölderlin, “poetry treats the different faculties ... so that the representation of these different faculties makes a whole,” and “the connection between the *more independent parts* of the different faculties” is something he calls “the rhythm” (p. 237).

“Ou bien le débarquement désastreux” offers neither a complete image, nor a musical chronology, nor a linear narration. Three texts allude to possible internal topics that arise personally and individually for the spectator as a result of the entire performance as such: Joseph Conrad’s “Congo Diary,” a prose text called “Herakles 2 or the Hydra” by Heiner Müller, and a poem on pine wood by Francis Ponge. Topics circulate around the fear of the stranger, violence and colonization, an insistence on acknowledgement and respect for ethnic differences rather than shared traits; or to put it with Maurice Blanchot: “the other is not your brother.”

By the way, all the voices in this piece were in French or Mandingo, languages that some people might not understand. I actually do not mind that a bit. One can “rest in it untroubled,” as Gertrude Stein says when she describes her first theatre experiences: “I must have been about sixteen years old and [Sarah] Bernhardt came to San Francisco and stayed two months. I knew a little french [*sic*] of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so french I could rest in it untroubled. And I did. ... The manners and customs of the french theatre created a thing in itself and it existed in and for itself.... It was for me a very simple direct and moving pleasure” (pp. 258-59). And theatre as a “thing in itself,” not as a representation or a medium to make statements about reality, is exactly what I try to offer.

In such theatre the spectator is involved in a drama of experience rather than looking at drama in which psychologically motivated relationships are represented by figures on stage. This is a drama of perception, a drama of one’s senses, as in those quite powerful confrontations of all the elements - stage, light, music, words - in which the actor has to survive, not to act. So the drama of the “media” is actually a double drama here: a drama for the actor as well as a drama for the perception of the audience.

This divided experience probably explains why two years later - in the performance “Black on White” - I put the weight, **not** on the virtuosity of a brilliant actor but on the shoulders of eighteen musicians in the Ensemble Modern, a collective protagonist, so to speak. This was therefore also a statement against an art form that is often entirely hierarchical: in its organization and working process, in the use of theatrical elements, in its

artistic result, up to the totalitarian character of its aesthetic and relationship towards the audience.



***Black on White*, Photo Credit: Wonge Bergmann**

In this piece the musicians of the Ensemble Modern do not vanish in the pit for the benefit of soloists. They discover their own abilities in doing other things beyond their musical virtuosity: writing, singing, sorting things, playing badminton and all sorts of games, hitting the drums with tennis balls or failing to do so, and reading: “Ye who read are still among the living: but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows” (Poe, p. 147).

This early anticipation of the “death of the author” in Edgar Allan Poe’s parable “Shadow” should not only be taken literally (in reference to Heiner Müller, the friend and German author who had recommended this text to me before he died while rehearsals for “Black on White” were under way). The absence here is to be found on other levels as well: as a refusal of any dramatic action, for example. I think “little seems to happen,” said

Ryan Platt in his introduction to a screening of the film version of “Black on White” at Cornell two weeks ago.

And “Black on White” is a piece on writing. “Writing, which has traditionally retired behind the apparent presence of performance, is openly declaring itself the environment in which dramatic structure is situated,” as the theatre scholar Elinor Fuchs wrote in 1985. “The price of this emergence, or perhaps its aim, is the undermining of theatrical Presence,” which also undermines the self-given presence of the actor (pp. 163-64). Presence is doubly reduced in “Black on White” by the rather amateurish ‘non-presence’ of the musicians, who never did anything similar before. You can observe the un-expressive, un-dramatic, but highly concentrated faces of the performers, who do not pretend to be anyone other than themselves as musicians in that very space and moment while we watch them. Often turning their backs towards the audience and dividing the attention of the audience across the landscape of eighteen simultaneously active persons. To cite Elinor Fuchs again: “A theatre of Absence ... disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilizes meaning” (p. 165).

In this performance we as spectators have to focus ourselves (forget for a moment that it is done here for you by the camera and the editing of this film clip). This is similar to aspects of a later piece with the same musicians (“Eislermaterial”) where the centre stage is empty all the time.

The musicians all sit on the three sides of the stage during the performance, and “presence” happens on an acoustic level purely by close amplification. Structural hindrances / resistances / difficulties for the musicians (the distance between them, the separation of the strings, and so on) help to visualize for the audience the communicative process of an ensemble responsible for itself without a conductor. In the conductor’s

place you find only a little statue of the composer Hanns Eisler, a close friend and collaborator of Bertolt Brecht.



***Eislermaterial*, Photo Credit: Matthias Creutziger**

Strangely enough – though I had been warned by serious professionals – the audience’s attention did not fade away with the absence of any spectacular visual distraction during the performance. “The experience of fabricated presence – self-produced in the act of perception – grows to the degree that the demonstrated presence disappears” - as my colleague Gerald Siegmund phrased it in his recently published study on “absence” (cited in my translation from *Abwesenheit*, p. 81).

Speaking about concerts, I would say that it is often the conductor in concerts who prevents the self-responsibility of the musicians, on the one hand, and a self-responsible perception of the audience, on the other. Elias Canetti tells us why:

“There is no more obvious expression of power than the performance of a conductor. ...

The immobility of the audience is as much part of the conductor's design as the obedience of the orchestra. They are under a compulsion to keep still. Until he appears they move about and talk freely among themselves. ...

During a concert, and for the people gathered together in the hall, the conductor is a leader. ...

... He is the living embodiment of law, both positive and negative. His hands decree and prohibit. His ears search out profanation.

Thus for the orchestra the conductor literally embodies the work they are playing, the simultaneity of the sounds as well as their sequence; and since, during the performance, nothing is supposed to exist except this work, for so long is the conductor the ruler of the world. ”

(Crowds and Power, pp. 394-96)



Eraritjaritjaka, Photo Credit: Mario del Curto

This text is presented as an impressive monologue by the actor André Wilms in the music-theatre piece “Eraritjaritjaka” before he leaves the stage,

followed by a camera man, while his live video-image continues to be projected onto the backdrop of the stage, the white façade of a house. The audience sees how he leaves the foyer of the theatre, enters a car, drives through the city in which the piece is being performed, leaves the car after a few minutes of driving, and enters his apartment. The words we hear are taken from Canetti's notebooks: "A country where anyone who says 'I' is immediately swallowed up by the earth" (*The Secret Heart of the Clock*, p. 129).



***Eraritjaritjaka*, Photo Credit: Krzysztof Bielinski**

It is obvious: the actor's absence is going to be a long one. The audience, released from the strong presence of the actor's earlier monologue, is irritated, confused, and relaxed at the same time. Audience members do not even know if the actor, whom they paid to see, will ever come back. The camera follows him to his apartment, where he does un-dramatic things:

opening and reading letters, making notes that borrow from Canetti (such as “ Explain nothing. Put it there. Say it. Leave.” from *The Secret Heart of the Clock*, p. 106), sorting the laundry, watching television, reading the newspaper, living alone without being able to - thinking aloud: “You can’t exist with human beings. You can’t exist without human beings. How can you exist?” (in my translation from Canetti’s *Aufzeichnungen 1973-1984*, p. 52). And he is preparing scrambled eggs.

The clock at the back of the kitchen shows the actual time, and the rhythm in which the actor cuts onions is in sync with a quartet on stage playing a string quartet by Maurice Ravel. Both prove the liveness of the mediated presence.



Eraritjaritjaka, Photo Credit: Krzysztof Bielinski

Let's recap the different concepts of a "theatre of absence" as they have been discussed so far. Absence can be understood:

- as the *disappearance* of the actor / performer from the center of attention (or even from the stage altogether)
- as a division of presence among all elements involved – you could also call it a polyphony of elements (in the actual sense of a sort of independent voice of the light, the space, the texts, the sounds (as in a fugue by J.S. Bach)
- as a *division* of the spectator's attention to a collective protagonist with performers who often hide their individual significance by turning their backs towards the audience
- as a *separation* of the actors' voices from their bodies and of the musicians' sounds from their instruments
- as a de-synchronization of listening and seeing, a separation or division between visual and acoustic stage
- as the creation of spaces in-between, spaces of discovery, spaces in which emotion, imagination, and reflection can actually take place
- as an abandonment of dramatic expression ("the drama doesn't happen on stage," says Heiner Müller)
- as an empty center: literally, as an empty center stage, meaning the absence of a visually centralized focus, but also as the absence of what we call a clear "theme" or message of a play; we could compare the empty center with the *nouveau roman* by French authors in the 1950s, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, who surrounded his topics with irritating techniques, in novels in which core themes are not even explicitly mentioned but rather permanently provoked and

obsessively produced for the reader (for example, jealousy in *La Jalousie*)

- as absence of a story, or to paraphrase Gertrude Stein: “anything that is not a story can be a play” (see her essay “Plays” from *Lectures in America*). “What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many ... so why tell another one” (p. 260)?
- And last but not least absence can be understood as avoiding the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, the things that are usually done on stage. Or in the words of Elias Canetti again, which we hear when the actor in “Eraritjaritjaka” finally opens the window of his apartment:
“To spend the rest of one’s life only in completely new places. To give up books. To burn everything one has begun. To go to countries whose languages one can never master. To guard against every explained word. To keep silent, silent and breathing, to breathe the incomprehensible.
I do not hate what I have learned; I hate living in it.”
(*The Human Province*, p. 160)

In this moment the audience sees the actor live on stage opening one of the black windowpanes in the backdrop and slowly – seeing the camera man and the string quartet through those windows in the actor’s living room – the audience understands that he might have never really left the stage.



***Eraritjaritjaka*, Photo Credit: Krzysztof Bielinski**

This complex twist of inside and outside views, of music, text, perception, deception, the surprising sudden shock of an unforeseeable presence - this becomes one of the actual dramas in “Eraritjaritjaka” for the audience.

And we – my team and I – became interested in going further after this production. The experiment we tried with “Stifters Dinge” (a piece without a performer) was this: Will the spectator’s attention endure long enough if one of the essential assumptions of theatre is neglected: the presence of an actor? Even more recent definitions in performance theory still speak of the co-presence or common attendance of performers and spectators at the same time in the same space (see Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, on this critical point).

So “Stifters Dinge” became a “no-man show,” in which curtains, light, music, and space, all the elements that usually prepare, support, illustrate, and serve a theatrical performance and the actor’s dominance, become – in a

kind of justice long deferred - the protagonists, together with five pianos, metal plates, stones, water, fog, rain, and ice.

When nobody is on stage to assume the responsibility of presenting and representing, when nothing is *being* shown, then the spectators must discover things themselves. The audience's sense of discovery is finally enabled by the absence of the performers, who usually do the art of demonstrating and binding the audience's vision to them by attracting total attention. Only their absence creates the void in which this freedom and pleasure are possible.

In "Stifters Dinge" the performers are replaced by non-anthropomorphic machines and objects, elements such as curtains, water, fog, rain, and ice - and by acousmatic voices. We hear bodyless voices, the voices of Claude Lévi-Strauss, William Burroughs, and Malcolm X, and we also hear early recordings of anonymous voices from South America, Greece, and from Papua New Guinea. During the incantations from Papua New Guinea we see reflections of water on a ballet of curtains slowly moving up and down.



***Stifters Dinge*, Photo Credit: Mario del Curto**

The effect of such acousmatic voices is explained by my colleague Helga Finter: : “... the recorded voice suggests to the spectator the construction of presence-effects, since he perceives the spoken words as addressed to him. This can be traced to the acousmatic status of such a voice, the source of which remains invisible. The spectator will thus connect what he hears with what he sees in order then to formulate hypotheses about motivation and causality. His scopic desire stages what his invocatory desire [*invokatorisches Begehren*] is able to hear. In this way the perceptive intelligence of the spectator’s own senses actively stages the performance when the spectator weaves and reads his own audiovisual text....”

In traditional theatre, which is based on literature, and in opera subjects in the audience recognize themselves in the actor or singer or dancer on stage; they identify themselves with the performers and mirror themselves in them. This obviously does not work in “Stifters Dinge,” and it rarely works in my earlier pieces. Instead of offering **self-confirmation** to both a performing and a perceiving subject, a “theatre of absence” might be able offer an artistic experience (and here I refer to a recent publication by André Eiermann titled *Postspektakuläres Theater*) that does not necessarily have to lie in a *direct* encounter (with the actor), but in an experience *through alterity*. Alterity is to be understood here, not as a direct relation to anything, but as an indirect and triangular relationship whereby theatrical identification is replaced by a rather insecure confrontation with a mediated third, something that we might term the other.

Absence as the presence of the other, as a confrontation with an unseen picture or an unheard word or sound, an encounter with forces that people cannot master, that are out of our reach.

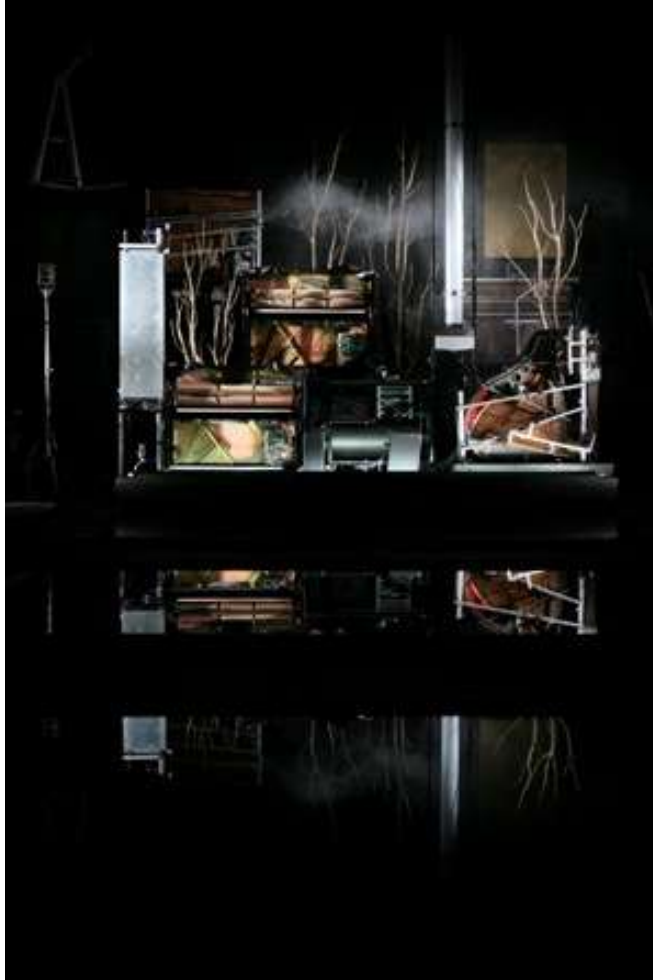
What started as a rather formal experiment became – through the elements entering the stage themselves - a rather anthropological and ecological topic for my team, the audience, and me.



***Stifters Dinge*, Photo Credit: Klaus Gruenberg**

Over the course of ten minutes the audience sees a projection of a painting called “The Swamp” by the Dutch painter Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael (1660). At the same time we hear on the acoustic stage the voice of a Scottish actor reading a winter story about an icefall in a forest. “We listened and stared; I don’t know whether it was amazement or fear of driving deeper into that thing” (Stifter, p. 304). This is from a story by the Austrian author Adalbert Stifter (in Miriam Heard’s translation for the 2007 program brochure for “Stifters Dinge” in Lausanne). This is the author who lent his name to my piece, which was inspired in part by Stifter’s careful insistence on the description of details in nature, of ecological disasters, unknown objects, strange habits, and remote cultures – all of which he always called “the thing” (*das Ding*).

After the reading of Stifter's wintry tale five pianos, some metal plates, and a fog machine all together play a sort of concert, before it begins to rain.



Stifters Dinge

Photo Credit: Mario del Curto

Now, after more than 150 performances, it seems to me, the experiment works. Audience members react with puzzlement, irritation, and heightened attentiveness. They are intellectually and emotionally animated. And they often let me know with relief: “finally nobody on stage to tell me what to think.” I am sorry I have to do the opposite here. Thank you for listening.

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