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Speculations

Abstract: *The strange event, the acting student's paradoxical emotional reaction gives rise to a question. Why break out in tears of refusal in the very moment of creative, felicitous play? We are left thinking. What is the nature of the young actor's fear? What powers was she exposed to on stage? Did they trigger a memory from her childhood? What was going on inside her?*

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Actors' fears

What got into Hannah J.? This question hangs mockingly in the air long after the room is empty. Everyone is gone. Hannah J. and her teacher are gone too, after a long silence and a short conversation.

Uncharacteristically, someone has opened the window in the auditorium and turned off the lights. Usually everything is closed up tight, the air is unbearable, and all the lights are on. All the spotlights and all the ceiling lights are on, for no reason at all. But not this time. This time all the switches are off, and the window is wide open, as if the room needed fresh air, so as to more easily get a grip on leftover thoughts.

Ideas shoot back and forth to explain Hannah J.'s behavior. Thoughts cross each other, become superimposed, are released, let go of and picked up again. Despite misfiring, they press to be formulated; to be thought through and spelled out.

What drives an actor to stop playing in the middle of a scene? What makes her interrupt herself and perhaps even radically want to give up the profession?

The first spontaneous answer that comes to mind is failure. It is because her acting was no good, did not touch anyone, or because she was rejected. That sounds trivial. Everyone has trouble dealing with failure, not just actors. They do not have the sole rights on it. Of course not. But failure hits actors unfiltered. It touches their very self. There is nothing for them to hide behind. No medium comes between themselves and their acting, no tool, no instrument, no machine. They themselves are the "machines" that need to be turned on artistically. Their "material" is their own flesh and any problems that arise must be dealt with by the actor on stage, with "life and limb," *live* before the eyes and ears of others. For it is not theater or performance if others are not present to see. From the beginning, theater has needed spectators, eyewitnesses, an audience. But witnesses can praise or shame, can affirm or deny, can give a thumbs up or a thumbs down. Nobody is immune to this, nobody is spared, and there is no justice. None of this is new. Yet it continues to be underestimated.

Actors are subject to physical exposure. That may sound fairly harmless in theory, but it feels anything but harmless when you experience it on

your own body. The intimacy on display is very fragile, and the risk is high and always volatile. There is no time lag, for everything takes place in the present moment. An actor can never discreetly hit “delete.” He has always already been seen; he is always already under observation, whether in rehearsal or during performances. Only the actor can never see himself, not even back to front, as in a mirror. He can never take a step back to look at what he has done. He cannot give himself any distance. He is stuck with himself. He never sees his work with his own eyes. Only others see it. This makes actors, as it would make anyone, extremely dependent on whatever they hear about their own effect, and it makes them extremely sensitive.

There is hardly an actor who does not, if only silently, ask the muted question after the show: how did I do? It is a classic, a running gag among actors; everyone laughs about it. There is, of course, a comical side to it, something ludicrous, obsessive. But honestly, who can say that he is not susceptible to the echo of his performance, from the immediate applause to the later reviews? Who is not pleased? Who is not offended? Who is not affected? There are but a few who do not open the papers after a premiere, even if many deny it. There are but a few who have not turned to a new review with a gaze that takes on a life of its own, scanning the text for their own name.

It is easy to call this act of always first looking for one’s self mere vanity and egoism. Vanity and egoism are common attributes among actors. Stereotypical ascriptions and expectations. Typical, you think, and are satisfied to think no further. What for? However, these stereotypes are not only unjust but also they hit the actor’s sore spot. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about Richard Wagner, “You know not, who Wagner is: quite a great actor! [...] the greatest mime, the most astounding theatrical genius, [...] all he strains after is effect, nothing but effect.”¹

But to say Hannah J. is in love with herself, that she is a junkie for admiration, a junkie for success, does not help us understand what has happened. It does not help us grasp it. It does not get us anywhere. It makes no sense, even if we hear it in the media all the time. Because just a moment ago, Hannah J. was incredibly successful. The echo she

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (Slough: Dodo Press, 2008), 11–12.

received from the concentrated silence of the audience signaled anything but failure.

Too bad. It would have been so easy to say a young drama student broke down in tears because her performance was completely amiss. That would have made logical sense. The actor stood up to the pressure for a long time, but now she has given in. She was crying because she was ashamed, because she felt like it was her fault. Ashamed *ad personam*, faulty *ad personam*. No matter how hard she tried, she played leadenly, again and again; she couldn't manage to meet the theatrical expectations. She just was not good enough, or not good enough yet. The role was too difficult or she was too bad – one or the other. There is no escaping negative self-scrutiny. The spectator at her back was all powerful. Her acting remained a wooden construct, forced. She knew it, but she could not change it and then she just wanted to give up; she couldn't go on anymore. Enough sweat and toil before all eyes with nothing to show for it. She ran out of energy. Tears welled up. She became more and more scared – scared of Joan's feelings, scared of Friedrich Schiller's language, scared of the text, of the next sentence, of the next word, of the next step. She became scared of the stage and scared of the theater; scared she would never get another role, or only small roles; scared that her dream of becoming an actor was maybe an illusion, that she had overestimated herself. She saved herself by crying – tears of failure; tears because she was a theatrical flop.

But the case of Hannah J. clearly broke this mold. Hannah J.'s reaction was divergent. Anachronistic. One and one do not make two. The logic is tangled. Its conclusion stutters. Had she not just overcome all her blocks, were not all her pores open, her acting inspired and suddenly skillful? Was her performance not beyond all expectations? There was no trace of failure. On the contrary. Hannah J. was exceptionally good. Yet still she broke down in tears and even felt compelled to give up her very desire to become an actor. It was as if she needed to defend herself from an attack.

Crying

Picture the French Revolution. It is the period after the September massacres. The revolutionaries have begun to target each other.

Maximilien de Robespierre has aided Georges Danton's demise. At dawn, Danton will die an ugly bloody death by the same guillotine that raged under his reign. Staring at the star-studded night sky, Georg Büchner (twenty-two years old, two years before his own untimely death) has Danton say, "The stars are scattered over the sky like shimmering tears; there must be deep sorrow in the eye from which they trickled."²

Suffering, worry, and sorrow turn beauty into horror. This elicits tears. Something rips, befalls you, shocks you, moves you, wounds you, exposes you. Something we have no control over. The pain is too great. Or the joy. Anger takes over, or impotence, rage, fear, desperation, grief. A hidden memory returns unbidden from oblivion or a realization shocks us and incites an inner war.

Tears can be bitter or sweet. Either way, tears tip the situation. Your eyes cloud over, you cannot see, and can barely talk. Tears signal a state of emergency, a cry for mercy, a means of asking others – and one's self – to show consideration. Tears are a way to lighten up and ease the pain. At the same time they are a barricade behind which you can hide, deflect the pain. The gaze is blurred, veiled by tears; they rob the eyes of sight. They make you blind. Emotionally blind? Blind to the reason for crying, even if it caused the tears? Do we cry for whatever cries out in pain, that which we do not want to acknowledge? There is an incongruity here, a paradox, a contradictory message. As the gaze clouds, a blind spot is revealed by the tears. Tears let us see what we have ignored; they show us the event affecting us in that moment.

Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye. And what they cause to surge up out of forgetfulness, there where the gaze or look looks after it, keeps it in reserve, would be nothing less than *aletheia*, the *truth* of the eyes [...].³

2 Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, trans. Henry J. Schmidt in Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt (eds.), *Georg Büchner. Complete Works and Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1986), Act IV, Scene III, 114.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 126. Italics in the original.

It is hard to ignore someone who is crying. They automatically grab our attention. Crying irritates us. Tears alarm us, even those of us who just happen to be there in whatever role, even that of gawker. Tears call out to the silent observer as much as to the adversary, involving both in the event they have triggered. Tears turn bystanders into participants, even when they turn away.

Crying disrupts daily life. It awakens dismay, pity, or disgust, even aversion. It makes us think, want to help. It makes us curious. Something is out of sync, derailed. *What happened?* The old question of *why* arises automatically. It will not leave us alone, demands to be assuaged. It wants to be solved, resolved, deciphered. Whether we want to or not, we relate the event to ourselves, try to make sense out of it for ourselves. We are driven by the need to find a key, a good ending, so that we can deal more appropriately with what has happened, or at least understand it better in retrospect. We tend to begin to speculate. We look around, peer in dark corners, run ideas by our inner eye (*speculari*), weigh them, consider them, while always running the risk of missing things by a whisker, always ready to be determinedly wrong.

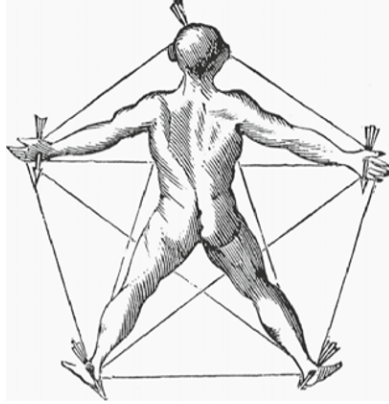


Figure 2.1 The image of the god Veivovis (Mars) was used by the ancient Egyptians as an image for bad luck.

Giordano Bruno, *De monade numero et figura liber consequens de minimo magno et mensura*, 1591: fol. 91. Courtesy of Heidelberg University Library, M 344-5-6 RES.

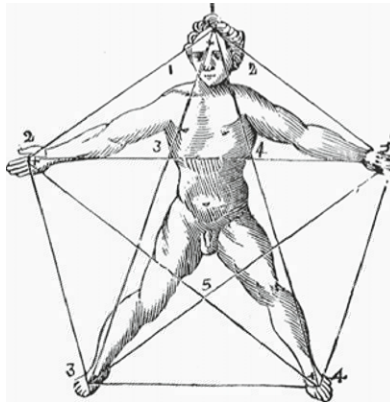


Figure 2.2 While the image of Diovis (Jupiter) stood for good luck.

Giordano Bruno, *De monade numero et figura liber consequens de minimo magno et mensura*: fol. 92. Courtesy of Heidelberg University Library, M 344-5-6 RES.

Child's play

The first letters. A, B, C. Thin lines, straight and curved, become letters in a fixed order. ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. Twenty-six, no more. From these 2 x 13 letters words grow, first sentences. The fascination of reading and writing.

In made-up tirades a child plays what they have just learned. Spell house. H O U S E. Good, again. HOUSE. Very good, now I can doooo it!! Househousehousehousehouse. A tower of syllables. Househousehousehousehouse? Crazy word monster, it sounds so funny. househousehousehousehouse. House? What is a house? The meaning of the letters gets lost in their repetition. A house is a house is a house is a house! And a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, says Gertrud Stein, the early messenger of enigmatic texts, spiral sentences that turn and turn until they come to a kind of linguistic standstill. "Play, play every day, play and play and play away, and then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it." Now I don't understand anything anymore.*

Language, otherwise always at their disposal, has dissolved, its syntax shaken, they can no longer depend on the words, which become a convention, arbitrary signs that signify an agreed-upon meaning. Repeating a word shrinks its meaning until it dissolves. The letters seem strange, standing in a line, drained of meaning until they become meaningless. The madness of possibility, fascinating play, contradictory meaning are presented by a present of letters.

* Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, Ulla E. Dydo (ed.) (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 147–148.

Exposed

The search engine cannot be turned off. It spins its web of thoughts – ruminations about the past, or protest about the present, or desire for the future, depending. The search machine continues in pursuit of Hannah J.'s tears and the taboo area that was touched upon.

Back to the beginning. Slowly. Step by step. What happened in auditorium X? What exactly did we observe?

Just when it had basically been decided that the play should be stopped, when everyone had secretly given up on any more attempts, there was a startling turn of events.

It was as if a railway switch had suddenly jumped over by itself, and unexpectedly the event of playing a role took hold of Hannah J., “kidnapped” her as it were (why not, kidnapped fits well), and all that had been a cramped struggle, the *effort* of her attempts, disappeared – and the play, thus freed, suddenly became ecstatic.

Failure turned into its opposite. One could also say the moment of resignation⁴ was identical with the moment in which the will stopped trying to rule over the play, or vice versa, the moment of resignation coincided with the moment in which control over the play was taken away from the will.

And yet, unexpectedly, the *kairos*⁵ of the play did not bring joy or happiness to the young actor but led her, on the contrary, to tears and defensiveness. Misfortune. It was as if the propitious moment of felicitous

4 Arno Böehler, *Politiken der Re-Signation: Derrida – Adorno* (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2008).

5 *Kairos*, which stems from *keiro* (cut off) is related to *krinein* (separate, decide, judge). The substantive of *krinein* is *krisis*. *Krisis* is separation, a turning point. *Kairos* is time (*chronos*) cut in two halves, a before and an after. It is the middle (*metrion*) of time. *Kairos* as the crisis of *chronos* is a measure of time in the sense of *kriterion* and *metrion*. As a measure of time, *kairos* itself cannot be measured. For this reason, *kairos* not only had a practical meaning for the ancient Greeks but also an aesthetic meaning. As a measure it creates symmetry, beauty; it brings parts together, *harmonia*. It is a cut in the flow of *chronos*. In separating time it creates rhythm and thus harmonizes time that moves in different directions.

Finding words, emptying words. Finding meaning, emptying meaning. Magic play in the playing field of being-in-the-world.

*One of the first words a child learns to spell, a word that stands proudly in all school notebooks, is the word "I". The tiny word I in uncertain writing all down the line, an I and an asterisk alternate, along the first, the second, the third line down to the bottom margin of the page. I * I * I * I * I.*

I, I, I, I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I. The child plays some more with the syllable tower, lets the letters gel, become an empty echo, topple, they are built up again with gusto, a hybrid form, I I I I I, the letters become a monstrosity. Paralyzed, the child continues to play, I I I I I I I I I I I I I I. I, the most affectionate of words. I, the word of identity, of unbroken unity, of self-conformity. "I" that means me!, the child suddenly realizes, ImeImeIme, how strange it sounds, alien, threatening, and then it flashes, I, who am I saying that to? Instinctively, the child's hand moves to feel head. I, I'm saying that to myself.

Who is the addressee? Who is the addresser? These questions jump at the child from behind in the middle of playing, an ugly dwarf he suddenly has to carry.

Creation of the ego, dissolution of the ego. What has become inoperative? Who causes it? Me? Myself? Unsuspecting, in the middle of innocent play with harmless words, scary, strange, Ime. I'm becoming a stranger to myself, I'm becoming scared of myself. I me, ImeImeIme.

Turned out of infant paradise, dropped and running – where to? Pulled where? Nowhere. What wants me? The im-possibility of my existence? Completely beside myself, of my own doing, you should not eat the apple, the forbidden one. The Other in me, the

acting were not a gift offered to Hannah J., but, in an odd turnabout, constituted a kind of threat.

Assuming that Hannah J. did not overreact and become hysterical as a result of the release of the tension that had been building up so long, and assuming it was not just petulance, what was her misery made of? Was it the threat of being haunted by the specter of the art of acting? Was the sudden power of resignation in the middle of felicitous play overpowering, more difficult than failure in infelicitous play, because it broke an unspoken rule? Was it a taboo⁶ that sought immediate revenge for having been broken by destabilizing Hannah J.'s idea of herself? Was it the fear that goes hand in hand with the "noblest of all nations, the resignation,"⁷ as the philosophizing troublemaker Johann Nestroy ironically put it? Did fear begin to gnaw at the maxim of self-assuredness?

Does the acting ego, in the arms of passivity, no longer feel protected and grounded in free will, but instead feel as if it were random, contingent, and no longer positively identifiable? Where is it being led to? To nonsense?⁸ Is it being led to where there is nothing to hold on to, where you are safe from nothing because the will is no longer dependable and logical reason no longer applies? Fear may have arisen unwittingly and unwillingly become part of a transformation machine, like for Alice in

6 "The meaning of "taboo," as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, "sacred," "consecrated," and on the other hand, "uncanny," "dangerous," "forbidden," "unclean." [...] Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin. Though they are unintelligible to us, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course." Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 13. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), 18.

7 "Comfort yourself with knowledge pussface and know: the most noble nation under the nations is the resignation." Johann Nestroy, *Das Mäd'l aus der Vorstadt* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co, 1962), Vol. 5, Act 1, Scene 12, 534.

8 "Hurry, hesitant Time, and bring them up against nonsense, / Else you'll warn them in vain what their good sense is about / Hurry, denature them wholly, up against frightful non-being / Bring them, or never they'll know just how denatured they are. / Never these fools will reform until they begin to feel giddy, / Never [recover their health] save in the stench of decay." "Prayer for the Incurable," in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2001), 59.

phantom of my self. Am I my own undoing? What's come over me? The ego dissolved in an unending echo that takes meaning away from the familiar word. Close up. Silly game! All joy destroyed, every plus turned into a minus. Put through the wringer until there's nothing left, nothing, nothing at all. I disappear into nothing, black magic, correspondence with un-time.

An initial emergency of being. Whatever.

the rabbit hole.⁹ It may have been fear that embodying Schiller's Joan of Arc would be like jumping after a ridiculous white rabbit without wanting to,¹⁰ not literally, but in the action. Will you drive yourself crazy in the end? Will it be you standing at the final curtain? Or will you have been replaced by someone else?

it's like it's not me who's speaking, i'm no longer the subject, someone else is speaking through me¹¹ but it is me who's speaking, no one else but me, i speak i look i hear i smell i taste i feel i'm standing here on my own two feet i will now cross the stage

One's very self is threatened. The usual demands of the ego blow up a storm. *C'est moi, c'est moi!* you hear it call. But protest does not help. In the kairos of time the familiar order has run amok. A sore spot has been reached, an open boundary. The difference between interior and exterior you could always rely on has become tangled, all mixed up. You can no longer count on A being A or B being B, not that there is no counterpart, but the subject-object divide has disappeared, and other reference systems abound. Merde! Then the ego can do whatever it wants with itself. Create itself, destroy itself, be rid of itself. At any rate, it should take advantage of the situation because it has been offered a new career of unfettered freedom. No more constraints. No corset. No disciplinary action. No domestication. The belts and braces of all imaginary "upright holders"¹² have been cast aside. There is no one sitting in the control tower anymore. The windows and doors are open to the winds. The guy with the long white beard is long gone. And now his place is completely vacant. All authorities have disappeared, even the ego. The system has crashed. The game can only be played.

9 See, for example, Alice's musings in chapter 2 on whether she has perhaps turned into Ada or Mabel after falling down the rabbit hole. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 34.

10 *Ibid.*, 22.

11 "The voice is a threshold phenomenon...Is the voice therefore the experience of the presence of an inaccessible Other?" Doris Kollesch and Sybille Krämer (eds.), *Stimme. Annäherung an eine Phänomen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 12, 13.

12 See Klaas Huizing, *In Schrebers Garten* (Munich: Knaus Verlag, 2008). An "upright holder" (*Geradhalter*) is an apparatus invented by the German physician Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber to force children to sit upright at the table. His son, Daniel Paul Schreber, entered the history of psychoanalysis because his book *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* was analyzed by Sigmund Freud in an early case history.

Did Musagetes, god of poets and leader of the muses, change his lyre into a bow or his bow into a lyre in the kairos of the play? Is it time for a war or a wedding?

The poor ego gasps for air. It does not know what to do. Its imagination fails it. Struggling with itself, it is thrust into paralysis. Helpless, it collapses as its usual perceptions are turned around.

Both Joan's body, suddenly no longer caught between two book covers, and Schiller's language, no longer pressed between two lips, begin to rebel. They begin to act on their own, of their own will. They gain weight, put on pounds. They prop themselves up, are upheld, updated. No longer sanctioned by the ego, they subversively turn themselves over at the border crossing. They become spoken bodies, exscribed bodies.¹³ Alien words for an alienating act. Our skin provides no more protection, no shield. There is nothing to hold on to, no dependable boundary. No limit to the self. No "Halt! This is where I begin. Come no further!" The skin is no longer the border of the physis, but the site where it stretches, is crossed, and dissolves.

To be thrown off balance by the play that has been set free, plummeting without a plummet, caught in a dizzy spell. To an unknown X. To the unfoundation of one's being.

To suddenly become a stranger to yourself in the midst of playing. Against the tenet of the autonomy of the will, not to be able to get a grip, to lose yourself from sight, pushed aside ignominiously, no longer center stage, catapulted to the outer reaches – and the fear at the back of your head that you might lose yourself there. Sacrifice your self. Suffer the self-destruction of your own will. Your ego no longer the last bastion of certainty, but powerless and vulnerable. An open wound that hurts. A lacuna. A tear in the web of the consciousness that has reigned until this moment.

13 "We must begin [with] the *exscription* of our body [...]" Nancy, *Corpus*, 11.

“Who’s to say that the passion for the literal can be controlled? That gaping and scarring will not break through to the real at any given moment.”¹⁴

Was it this imposition of felicitous acting that made the actor break into tears and stop, that provoked a stubborn “no” to her former desire to become an actor?

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To find yourself *beside yourself*. Child’s play, incidental. As if you’d always been there. Not artificially forced and without any hysterics. No exaltedness, no fake theatrical aftertaste. No crutches of specious talent. None of that deceptive, mostly self-serving, affectedness. Let out of the cave of habitual perception into the surplus of play. By chance. As if by accident. In one instant pushed to the margins, the seams. An unnamed in-between. Between the lines, between the cracks, between the borders. Traveling in an imaginary Charon’s boat?¹⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy says in *Corpus*,

The a-part-self as departure is what’s exposed. “Exposition” doesn’t mean that intimacy is extracted from its withdrawal, and carried outside, put on display. “Exposition,” on the contrary, means that expression itself is an intimacy and a withdrawal. The *a-apart-self* is [...] this vertiginous withdrawal *of the self from the self* that is needed to open the infinity of that withdrawal *all the way up to self*. The body is this departure of self to self.¹⁶

14 Ronell, Avital, *The Test Drive* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 280.

15 Charon the ferryman brings the shadows of the dead over the river Styx (or Acheron) to Hades, home of the dead. The dead then go down to Hades as shadows and phantoms (*eidola kamonton*). The god of the underworld, whose name, “Hades,” probably means “that which is not visible,” was only reluctantly called by name by the Greeks, most probably for fear of thus getting the attention of the horrible ruler of the dead. See Edward Tripp, *Collins Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Collins, 2002).

16 Nancy, *Corpus*, 33. Italics in the original.

With-out me

no not like this not with me this wasn't part of the deal not like this you got that without me what would happen otherwise where will i be enough finito i've had enough i don't want to anymore what's this about anyway i thought it was about schiller's joan and now

If this is what Hannah J. thought, she was right. This is about Schiller's Joan of Arc. But not her literary fiction, which can be closed back into volume II after reading and put back onto the bookshelf unharmed. On stage it is not about an intellectual debate over Schiller's Joan, but about her embodiment in flesh and blood. On stage, it is about acting, as it is so aptly called, an animate act of surrender.

It is an act that requires the physical presence of actors who must risk themselves. In auditorium X, in this specific case, the presence of the drama student Hannah J. Her entire physical existence must come into play, with all of her senses, with everything she has – her entire concrete physical body, her embodied mind.¹⁷ She cannot use a stand-in; there is nothing between her and the role. She herself, Hannah J., has to embody the part to be played, hand her body over to the part.

i should hand myself over to joan of arc you've got to be kidding I'm not myself my self is joan of arc if it's me then i should give myself to myself that's absurd without me count me out I'm not interested

Understandable. There is a momentous *malheur* associated with handing oneself over on stage, with stage delivery. Maybe we can express it this way from a modern, enlightened, perspective. It is not enough that the actor has to give up her expectation of autonomy to others in the exposure her profession demands, the *malheur* increases twofold. If *homo sapiens* actually does become *homo ludens*,¹⁸ she is not only at the mercy of others

17 Erika Fischer-Lichte speaks of “embodied mind,” which is exemplified and highlighted in the performing arts, reminding us that “body and mind cannot be separated from each other. Each is always already implied in the other. ... Man is embodied mind. No human can be reduced just to body or mind ... The mind cannot exist without the body; it articulates itself through physicality.” Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), 99.

18 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press 1968).

but also, paradoxically, of herself – of herself as the elementary medium of this self, highly virulent in play. A contradiction opens up. A structure that is within her and over which she has no control. Within the actor as (active) subject, the self becomes a virulent (passive) subiectum.¹⁹

That could have caused Hannah J.'s distress. It is as if she had suddenly understood that, although the creative power of the will plays an important role in acting, the actor is completely at the mercy of her in-between, the uncanniness of her own being. A place she cannot access. When and why and whether it will become creative remains forever in darkness, despite all practical knowledge and ability, despite all the know-how that actors can and must accumulate. Perhaps Hannah J. only realized in the act of felicitous acting that the art of acting reaches far more deeply into her own existence than she had thought. Because theater, like all art, is inextricably linked to the baring of one's soul – a step that can by no means be skipped. It is a hard life being an artist, one might answer drily. But before all eyes, with one's own body? Each time anew? For life? Do I really want to do that to myself?

Yet perhaps Hannah J.'s refusal had nothing to do with the theater. Maybe it was something even more terrifying that showed its face. Perhaps the actor's dilemma only revealed the dilemma faced by all *Homo sapiens*: the impossibility of catching up with the dark side of existence. The anxiety caused by our inability to be sure of what we are or of that which we have up until now believed ourselves to be. A dilemma that we usually keep tightly under cover, deny completely, so as not to release its explosive power.

“The enlightened phantasm of the power and superiority of self-consciousness dissolves in fright. The sublime nature of art as an object of aesthetic experience reminds us of the illusory nature of identity and self-consciousness, of the fragility of the subject, and bursts open all claims to dominion,” writes Dieter Mersch in *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Event and aura – studies in the aesthetics of the performative).²⁰

19 “Subiectum” is a translation of *hypokeimenon* (that which lies below), which Aristotle understood both in terms of a logical subject (Phys. I 2, 185 a 32) and as a substance, i.e., the carrier of properties (Met. VII 3, 1029 a 1).

20 Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura, Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002), 135–136.

All things considered, why voluntarily choose to make a career out of acting? A career in which your self will be the battlefield. Why become an actor and expose yourself and your body to the threat inherent in the tension between availability and unavailability, between action and passion? Always in the real uncertainty of a moment of openness, or of a constant shortage or surplus, with no deciding between the two. And what is more, all this in an era in which passivity has lost its place, in which there is no more room for it in society. In an era in which pathos has been ruined and stigmatized, both politically and religiously, an era whose cardinal virtue is reason and in which the mathematization of concepts has precedence.

Maybe similar ideas suddenly went through Hannah J.'s head – not those words, but the feelings – and she warded them off. This was not what she thought being an actor would be like. Where exactly had she ended up? She did not want to be there. She got in accidentally in the middle of playing. “I beg your pardon,” Alice in Wonderland exclaimed as she zoomed down the hole. “I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth! How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downward!”²¹ In Georg Büchner’s *Lenz* this sounds a bit darker: “He felt no fatigue, except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head.”²²

But who wants to be able to walk with their head downward, with the sky as an abyss because they have mastered this fatal art? Who wants to fall through the earth? The a-logical is a mischief maker. Science is the era’s ideal, the figure, the algorithm. Not the body, not the word, and most definitely not some dubious in-between. There is no doubt about this, no matter how much talk there is of differences. Yes is yes, and no is no. Round is not square, hot is not cold, you cannot put a square peg in a round hole, and I am I.

But what happens with everything that I do not think or say when it nevertheless comes knocking, threateningly? For example, in the act of acting in the theater, this suspicious, corrupt with-out me, is an act in which I, the offender, am no longer sure I am the only offender, and still there is no other offender in sight.

21 Carroll, 23. Italics in the original.

22 Georg Büchner, *Lenz*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004), 3.

“How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed [...]? But if I’m not the same, the next question is, who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”²³

But take this literally? Channel the forgotten? Ridiculous. No. Without me. No, most definitely no. “For it might end,” as Alice thought “in my going out altogether like a candle. I wonder what I shall be like then.’ And she tried to remember what the flame of a candle is like after the candle has been blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.”²⁴

How do we react when our automatic behavior, our patterns, our clichés, our schemata,²⁵ no longer hold true? When the enlightened established order of who we are in the world loses its legitimacy – not abstractly, but physically – through that death in transformation that Heiner Müller defines as the core of theater.²⁶ How do we react? Do we hang up the phone to disconnect the unwanted call, the unsolicited intimacy of the numinous. *Exit tragoedia*. Quick, run! Out of here. Enough, finito. Curtain! These are other times. Disgusting, how could I get so close to myself?!

This tangled relationship to truth. This tangled relationship to the truth of play on stage.

“Once [...] I was a real turtle,”²⁷ the mock turtle says with tears in his eyes when Alice asks about his history.

23 Carroll, 4.

24 Ibid., 28.

25 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993); Arno Böhrer, *Singularitäten. Von der erotischen Durchdringung der Leere* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005).

26 Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller, *Ich bin ein Landvermesser. Gespräche mit Heiner Müller* (Hamburg: BEBUG mbH/ Rotbuch Verlag, 1996), 176.

27 Carroll, 118.



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