Theatre of Potentiality

On A-Human Excess in Performances by Fabrice Mazliah, Felix Rothenhäusler, and Boris Nikitin

Nikolaus Müller-Schöll
translated by Lydia White with Matt Cornish

A-Humanism, or, of Futures in the Past

In his essay "The Notion of Expenditure," Georges Bataille claims that "society/humanity" fundamentally excludes any possibility of a right to "unproductive expenditure" ([1933] 1985:119). Expenditure, Bataille says, contradicts the "only rational [principle] in the narrow sense of the word" (118), namely economy. As examples of expenditure or unproductive expenses, he names "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)" (118), as well as jewels, sacrifices that produce sacred things, gambling, and poetry. The opposition Bataille posits between "limited economy" based on the principle of rationality or usefulness and "general economy" based upon the principle of expenditure seems to suggest that neither one stands simply in opposition to the

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other. Rather, the limited economy can only exist by regularly having recourse to principles that are "beyond utility and pleasure" (116). If there was no waste, the consequence, Bataille says, would be a squandering of excess production in a catastrophic, warlike way.

At about the same time, between 1926 and 1933, corresponding rhetorical devices and figures emerged in Bertolt Brecht's theatre and theory with names and concepts such as the *Massemensch* (literally, mass man), the *dividuum*,[1] the asocial or "new animal." These phenomena, no less than the theory of Bataille, radically highlight the crises of bourgeois society and its limited economy, articulating the crises through a lack of appropriate language. "Aber etwas fehlt" (But there's something missing), the proletarian Jim Mahoney shouts in the eighth scene of the 1929 opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny; Brecht [1929:20]).[2] Jim wants to leave Mahagonny, even though, if we are to believe his friends, the city seems to be a veritable paradise: gin, whiskey, tranquility, fish, smoking, sleeping, views of the water, forgetting, conversations, harmony. His friends confront him with all conceivable pleasures, but nothing can stop him because, as he says again and again: "etwas fehlt" (something is missing). Jim repeats the sentence four times, describing from his perspective the supposed tranquility of an order that claims to regulate everything. At its center is the human being as a bourgeois subject, somebody who is literally subjugated. "Wir schlagen dich einfach nieder, / Ach, Jimmy, bis du wieder ein Mensch bist!" (We will just keep knocking you down, / Oh, Jimmy, until you are a human being again!; Brecht 1929:20), they tell the troublemaker. He later retorts: "Oh Jungens, ich will doch gar kein Mensch sein" (Oh boys, I really don't want to be a human being; 21). The tranquility in the eighth scene is the calm before the storm at the center of the piece, an allegory of revolution or apocalypse. But during the eighth scene this storm is still some ways off. In Jimmy's words, waiting takes the form of logorrhea, an excess of words, a theatrical catachresis: "Ich glaube, ich will meinen Hut auf-ess'n, / Ich glaube, da werde ich satt. / Warum soll einer nicht seinen Hut auf-ess'n, / Wenn er sonst nichts, wenn er sonst nichts, wenn / er sonst nichts zu tun hat?" (I think I want to eat my hat / I think it will make me full / What's wrong with eating one's hat / If there's nothing else, nothing else, nothing else to do; 21). This song is the diction through which Jim articulates his uprising. He thereby appears as a subaltern, a-human subject, who in notions of a critical theory appears to be nothing but a "shred of productive force" (Adorno [1930] 1997:118) or, in a more classical Marxist terminology, as proletarian against whom, in Marx's words, "wrong generally" (Unrecht schlechthin; [1844] 1974:107) is perpetrated by the ruling order of the state, that is of the city of Mahagonny. It is nonsense, measured by the ruling order's definitions of meaning: the absurd poetry in which those nonsubjects express themselves, people who have been robbed of not only every right but also the very possibility of articulating demands in the ruling order's language. In Jimmy's logorrhea, Brecht captures nothing less than the double notion of the human being that defines his play and his theatre at this moment. Against the "human being" who has been reduced to nothing more than a subject in the humanist order and its limited economy, Brecht contrasts a being characterized only by its nonsensical excess, an *un*being who cannot be completely subsumed by any definition and thereby blows apart every legal order, questioning not a specific right but rather the right to rule as such, a *désoeuvrement*—an unworking or deconstitution—of its community.

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1. A neologism, coined by Brecht in opposition to the individuum or bourgeois subject, "dividuum" corresponds to the new phenomenon of the mass human. A good example is Galy Gay, the main character of *Man Equals Man*, who experiences his own death and new birth under a different name in the crucial scene of the play.

2. I quote here from this first published version of the opera, which has not yet been translated into English.

Figure 1. (previous page) When Julia*n Meding first enters the stage in Hamlet*, he wears an aggressive-looking wolf mask, but his T-shirt says* Heiterkeit *exhilaration.* Hamlet*, directed by Boris Nikitin, 28 September 2016, Kaserne Basel. (Photo courtesy of Boris Nikitin)*

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Walter Benjamin speaks of Brecht's other "human being"—which can hardly be called a human being anymore because it precisely questions the universal notion of the human being—in 1931 in his first major Brecht essay, when he quotes Brecht's view that it is a "pleasurable recognition" to see the human being as someone who "is not so easily exhaustible," to realize "daß [er] ein [...] viele Möglichkeiten in sich Bergendes und Verbergendes ist" (that he holds and conceals so many possibilities within himself; [1966] 1998:13). What is striking about this quote is the doubling of "bergen" (holding) and "verbergen" (concealing). Perhaps Benjamin is hinting that he does not mean merely the human possibilities that can be carried over into the realm of reality, but more so those possibilities that stay concealed in the present, an excess that expresses itself in restraint rather than a spectacular excess. He seems to speak of a potentiality that is not subsumed by actualization—a "capacity for development" (13). How can this potentiality, this condition for the capacity for development, be grasped more precisely; where can it be discovered; and to what extent does it refer beyond any economy whatsoever and remind us of the a-human in humanism, the a-human that is the precondition of humanness?

Potentiality

Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Deleuze, Agamben

In 1931, the same time that Brecht places concealed possibilities at the heart of epic theatre, Martin Heidegger gives a lecture, "On the Essence and Actuality of Force," in which he carves out a close reading of the first three chapters of Book IX of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In doing so, Heidegger provides an interpretation of the phenomenon of *dynamis*, in Latin *potentia*, in German *Vermögen* (capability), *Kraft* (force), *Fähigkeit* (ability), or *Möglichkeit* (potential). His interpretation displays striking similarities to the above-mentioned discoveries Brecht is making at the same time. According to Heidegger, Aristotle, countering the Megarians, emphasizes the actuality of the capability that exceeds all possible actualization. It is a breathtaking new perspective in philosophy: while so far potentiality has been seen as actual only if it turned into actuality, Heidegger insists on the actuality of potentiality as such. He specifically justifies this by claiming to find this same idea in Aristotle's philosophy. Whereas the Megarians only see capability in production and therefore ultimately reduce it to its opposite, to reality or actualization, Aristotle, according to Heidegger, asks about a capability that is not just understood as potential, "but rather as actually present, although not being actualized" ([1931] 1995:146). Heidegger's interest in this question—with which he places Aristotle in opposition to the Aristotelian tradition—comes not least from the "being toward death" ([1926] 1996:240ff) he configures in section 53 of his fragmentary magnum opus *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time, 1926). Heidegger understands this being as "being toward possibility" and, more precisely, as a "running ahead to this possibility" (242). Here, Heidegger outlines an alternative to Hegel's dialectical *Aufhebung* (sublation, annihilation, and conservation) of death, comparable with that which Benjamin sums up in his description of the *Dialektik im Stillstand* (dialectic at a standstill; [1966] 1998:12). What Heidegger as well as Benjamin and Brecht thus attempt to put into words by referring to it as "concealed possibilities" (Brecht/Benjamin) or "pure possibility" (Heidegger) can also be described as the "singularity" of every existence, each different, because what is being described by both "concealed" and "pure" possibility is the mortality that differentiates each individual existence from all others (see Müller-Schöll 2018).

The first person to partially anticipate the significance of the constellation outlined here was Theodor W. Adorno. It is no coincidence that it is in a fragment dedicated to Benjamin's concept of history that Adorno speaks about the ruling society being transcended by "the potentiality it develops" and simultaneously, he adds, by "that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic" ([1951] 2005:151). But what we need to add to Adorno's formulation is that this cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material is nothing other than the "potentiality" on which Adorno does not comment any further, an excessive remnant,

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which a-socially, illegally, obscurely, pre- and postconceptually demands a future that is still in the process of arriving—both in the past and in the present.

If Benjamin attributed the theatre of concealed possibilities and, in particular, theatre's gesture to Kafka rather than to Brecht, it is little wonder that Gilles Deleuze would a few years later follow the book he wrote with Felix Guattari on Kafka (Deleuze and Guattari 1975) with a text that brings this argument to the theatre. The text, which Deleuze developed in 1978 specifically in response to Italian actor and stage director Carmelo Bene's theatre practice, once again tries to think about a theatre of potentiality. Deleuze says that subtracting the elements of theatre's power, its ability to represent in all senses of the word—to depict in a mimetic way but as well to speak for others and instead of others—releases "a new potentiality of the theatre, an always unbalanced, non-representative force" ([1979] 1997:242). Deleuze refers to a variability that can be explained, he writes, by "language's most inherent, creative property as apprehended in minor usage" (245). Although Deleuze, who remember was writing in the 1970s, initially claims that he is only describing theatre's usage by those who are different (from him)—by ethnic minorities, by women, children, etc.—further on he suggests that everybody uses language in this way, that it is about being "a foreigner, but in one's own tongue" (246), a "stranger [...] in one's own language" (247). He mentions as examples the deterritorialization of the phoneme, the emptying of meaning through repetitive speech, and the replacing of metaphors with metamorphoses. At any rate, Deleuze's concept of theatre is, in more general terms, related to an a-signifying use of language.

No one has focused on rhetorical devices of potentiality, pure potency, and capability as much as Giorgio Agamben. They appear in his essay about Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1993) as ink, writing, writing tablets, and a white leaf of paper; in his *Notes on Gesture* (1992) as the modes of being of "gesture" and dance; elsewhere as incapability or "decreation," or, as Didi-Huberman, and taking up Maurice Blanchot's concept of *désoeuvrement*—unworking, de-working, lack of work, inoperativeness, worklessness ([1969] 1983)—puts it in an essay dedicated to Agamben's thinking, a "politics of *désoeuvrement*" (2017:836–37). Agamben's specific contribution to the discussion here is the insistence that capability must always be thought of together with the abstinence inherent in every capability, with a constitutive passivity that emerges most clearly in Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," which Agamben categorizes as "potentia absoluta" (Agamben 1993). This is a sentence in which "to" does not refer to anything except, perhaps, the lack of an object of reference, emphasizing the withholding that constitutes speaking. What Agamben provides implicitly, as Didi-Huberman has convincingly argued, is an anti-response to Bataille's constellation, cited above: in Agamben's writings, withdrawal, privation, and the residuum of bare potency take the place of Bataille's spectacular excess.

Where does a contemporary theatre meet with this theatre of potentiality, of a-human excess, of overshooting, which is not least an excess of restraint? In a series of essays, I have tried to write about each different manifestation of its recurrence in performances and stagings by theatre-makers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, by describing the practices each in their own specific, singular modes of appearance.[3] I have written about artists whose work has been analyzed using such concepts as "postdramatic theatre," "performative turn," or "concept theatre/dance." These descriptions are useful in helping us understand as one comprehensive development the diffused phenomena and tendencies of the contemporary performing arts. At the same time, the specifics of individual performances are ignored to serve the main concepts. My approach, in contrast to earlier iterations of concept formation, takes up the singularity of each individual work of art, that which cannot be subsumed by the Hegelian dialectic of the particular and the universal (*Besonderes*

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3. Including: Heiner Müller, Frank Castorf, Christoph Marthaler, Francois Tanguy, Robert Wilson, Heiner Goebbels, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, Josef Szeiler, Claudia Bosse, Wanda Golonka, Laurent Chétouane, Forced Entertainment, and William Forsythe.

and *Allgemeines*). Methodologically, I am trying to make allowances for the ideas about potentiality I describe above, in their specific insistence on remainders, excesses, and noneconomic surplus (negating the constituted economy). The singularity of artistic works can no longer be captured by clearly outlined concepts, but rather only in singular "readings," as the word is understood in US American literary theory, and as articulated by theorists including Paul de Man (1984), Carol Jacobs (1975), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), and Samuel Weber (1987, 2021).

Three artists in the late 2010s productively continued, and recognizably took up, the work of the generation before them. This earlier generation of artists, whose formative years were those just after the millennium, include William Forsythe in dance and Laurent Chétouane in theatre (Müller-Schöll 2007a). It includes as well groups such as Rimini Protokoll and artists such as Walid Ra'ad and Rabih Mroué, whose works were described as theatre of the real, new documentary theatre, or "verbatim performance," but could be better understood as a reflection on the status of reality that can only be grasped as a detour of depiction that mingles fact and fabulation, thereby playing with our belief in the illusionary appearance (Müller-Schöll 2007b, 2013, 2017). I am focusing on three performances I do not claim are exemplary, but rather helped me to think about potentiality in important ways. One investigates the potentiality of various almost randomly collected things from everyday life in dance and choreography (Fabrice Mazliah); one investigates the linguistic medium and thereby the potentiality of language in spoken theatre (Felix Rothenhäusler); and one explores the potentiality that manifests itself in interruptions, where the mise-en-scène refers to the *real* in a Lacanian sense, that is, to corporeal preconditions that open up the ability to represent; to the body, which both holds and conceals possibilities without actually as such becoming a visible part of the mise-en-scène (Boris Nikitin).

The Potentiality of Things

Fabrice Mazliah/MAMAZA, Acme of Emphasis *(2017)*

Investigating potentiality has defined the works of the dancer, choreographer, and conceptual artist Fabrice Mazliah in a way that is at first quite unspectacular. Mazliah was a member of Ballett Frankfurt under William Forsythe for years before joining the Forsythe Company upon the ballet company's dissolution. He also began creating his own projects for the collective MAMAZA and from 2016 to 2019 had a residency as a fellow under the name Hood with several other former Forsythe dancers.[4] At the Choreographic Centre PACT Zollverein, a *Freie Szene* (independent arts community) production space, Mazliah has continued the choreographic research he pursued in his collaboration with the Forsythe Company. Practicing *désoeuvrement*, Forsythe, together with his dancers, dissolved what was considered a fixed set of rules. He arrived at a practice of releasing singular excesses that barely had anything to do with what he had been doing earlier in his career. Dancers were supposed to both obey the almost formalist rules of his creations and at the same time to play with them in a way that led to singular results in each of the different representations of one and the same core (see Müller-Schöll 2007a).

Acme of Emphasis by MAMAZA and Mazliah takes up this point by considering the "naturalness" of things, that is, by investigating their potentiality.[5] The "things" in this case are 18 objects set on a rotating wooden disk that is about the size of a carousel at a children's playground, perhaps three meters in diameter, and has been set up in the center of the space as a kind of do-it-yourself revolving stage. On the stage lie, among other things, a small yellow child's horn; a knobby red rubber ball used for hand massages; a potted plant with long, green, slightly tattered tendrils; several tubes; a bowl with two sponges saturated with colorful paint; a pair of scissors; a harmonica; a small stony object that looks like a fetish. Before we step inside the performance space, we are instructed by

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4. See http://workofact.net/company_collaborators.html.

5. *Acme of Emphasis*, conceived by Fabrice Mazliah, choreography by Mazliah and Adam Ster. My description refers to the performance in Künstler*innenhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt, on 22 March 2017. Pictures and a trailer are taken from another performance: http://mamaza.net/mamaza_fabrice_pieces_acme_of_emphasis_images.html.

Figure 2. Smeared with paint, Fabrice Mazliah and Adam Ster explore the relation of bodies and things onstage in their choreography. Acme of Emphasis, *Künstler*innenhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt/Main, 2017. (Photo by Jörg Baumann; courtesy of Fabrice Mazliah)*

the ticket attendant not to move our seats. They are distributed around the stage, facing the center, set up so that we are sitting slightly offset from one another, not in a row like in a classroom, not in a circle like at the circus, but rather in a way that looks as if middle schoolers have just left their seats—a bit shoddy. In fact, points on the floor that have been marked with tape give away the fact that the seats have been arranged strategically so that nobody is sitting directly next to the people with whom they entered the hall. Instead, everybody is sitting in the space more or less by themselves and, simultaneously, in a constructed constellation that could be all kinds of things, but which is neither natural nor arbitrary. Rather, it has been shaped by someone who wants to stage the way we watch, that is, in myriad different ways that cannot be generalized.

When the evening's two dancers (Mazliah and Adam Ster) step onto the stage, they are naked, with just a microphone strapped around their necks. These digitally transmit, in a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the seemingly insignificant sounds of their breathing as well as their voices. The sounds are broadcast through a loudspeaker, creating an indiscernible soundscape—a kind of music. Mazliah and Ster put on rubber gloves and begin to touch themselves and an imagined third person between them, indicating the outline of this imagined person with their hands. Later they develop movements while interacting with the different objects on the stage. Then they daub their bodies with the paints.

Their movement patterns are not easy to describe, and although the choreography seems to have been clearly structured, it is not structured in a way that we would understand if we just saw it once. There is nothing that we recognize, apart from the imitation of peculiar objects within the movements. At the beginning, Mazliah and Ster translate the houseplant's appearance into their dance-like movements. Later, use all the objects somewhat similar to the way stones are placed on (Jewish) graves; the two dancers become the ground for the things, laid down on their bodies. Everything seems to revolve around the relationship between the objects and the bodies of the performers. The initial question guiding the three-month-long rehearsals, Mazliah said in a talk after the show, was

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Figure 3. The inherent potentiality of things is apparent once they become part of the game without being completely absorbed into it. Acme of Emphasis *by Fabrice Mazliah and Adam Ster. Künstler*innenhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt/Main, 2017. (Photo by Jörg Baumann; courtesy of Fabrice Mazliah)*

about the relationship we have with natural and artificial things. But the question became more complex, because ultimately everything, even the supposedly natural, is artificial. The guiding questions became: What do we do to things? What do things do to us? Mazliah explained that he and Ster chose things they had worked with before, making sure that their configuration did not create the impression that these things were anything other than simply themselves. If they had chosen things in the same color, he said during the talk, "they wouldn't have been what they are anymore." There is more behind this statement than even Mazliah himself is probably aware of. Because the entire principle of the evening, its problem and its charm, can be found in this aside: What does it mean to leave the things the way they are, to leave them to their own character? Here we recognize the question that motivated Forsythe: whether it is possible for a dancer to act on the stage in the same way as the person who will later clean the stage. Whether and how it might be possible for them to do something onstage without just pretending to do it? Accordingly, we could now say of the things on the stage: Although they are not supposed to appear to be anything other than what they are, they are not simply what they are. To appear as things, they must be staged, i.e., they require a network of references. There is no other way to appear than in such a network, but, in the network, the objects also always already appear in relation, continuously creating new connections over the course of the evening, becoming things in hands, in arm bends, between legs, and on the dancers' heads—connecting with each other this way and also in a different way. It is precisely here, we realize, while being used, that the things develop their own strange mode of independent life, which lets them oscillate between natural and artificial. Paradoxically, they only appear as themselves when they stop being used instrumentally, when they disturb, perhaps even endanger the dancers. The "naturalness" of things that the production was searching for, one might infer, is in fact nothing more than potentiality both unconcealed and concealed; that which remains of them in their different usages and what is left behind, distributed throughout the space, as an ultimately useless remnant or residue. But it is precisely in this respect that the things are similar to the evening's performers, dancing with and between them. Because, at the end of the day, their bodies appear as these remnants, as things among things or as an a-human excess.

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The Potentiality of the Medium of Language

Felix Rothenhäusler, **The Re'Search** *(2017)*

One could also describe the words and gestures in the spoken theatre performance *The Re'Search* by Felix Rothenhäusler as an a-human excess.[6] At the beginning of the evening, two women and one man in casual tight black gym and ballet attire step onto the stage, situate themselves between a mirror wall and the audience, and begin speaking. They are not talking to each other, at least not in a dialogue of words. Rather, they are uttering a strange gibberish of fragments of speech that seem to be from emails, chats, WhatsApp histories, and blogs, and then put into a new context. The performers accompany their words with striking, seemingly displaced, and incomprehensible gestures. Far from illustrating, reinforcing, or accompanying action and meaning, the gestures are as radically separate from action and meaning as their words. The gaze of the three performers rests on the viewers and by making eye contact they show the audience that they are aware of the audience's gaze. Again and again, something of their artistry flashes up, that which they have learned. The way they speak, the sovereignty of their performance, the seductive *Gestus* of allusion show us they are trained actors, but, for the most part, their activity onstage has little to do with their training. They speak quickly, but incoherently. Spoken text in this performance is nothing more than a kind of material, a third space, like theatre itself, that has brought together three people who want to perform, or rather, play with each other.

Figure 4. *Performers Brigitte Hobmeier, Thomas Hauser, and Julia Riedler make eye contact with the audience in Felix Rothenhäusler's adaptation of Ryan Trecartin's* The Re'Search. *Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich, 2017. (Photo by Julian Baumann; courtesy of Felix Rothenhäusler)*

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6. *The Re'Search*, conceived and directed by Felix Rothenhäusler. Performers: Thomas Hauser, Brigitte Hobmeier, Julia Riedler. My description refers to the performance in Münchner Kammerspiele on 12 March 2017.
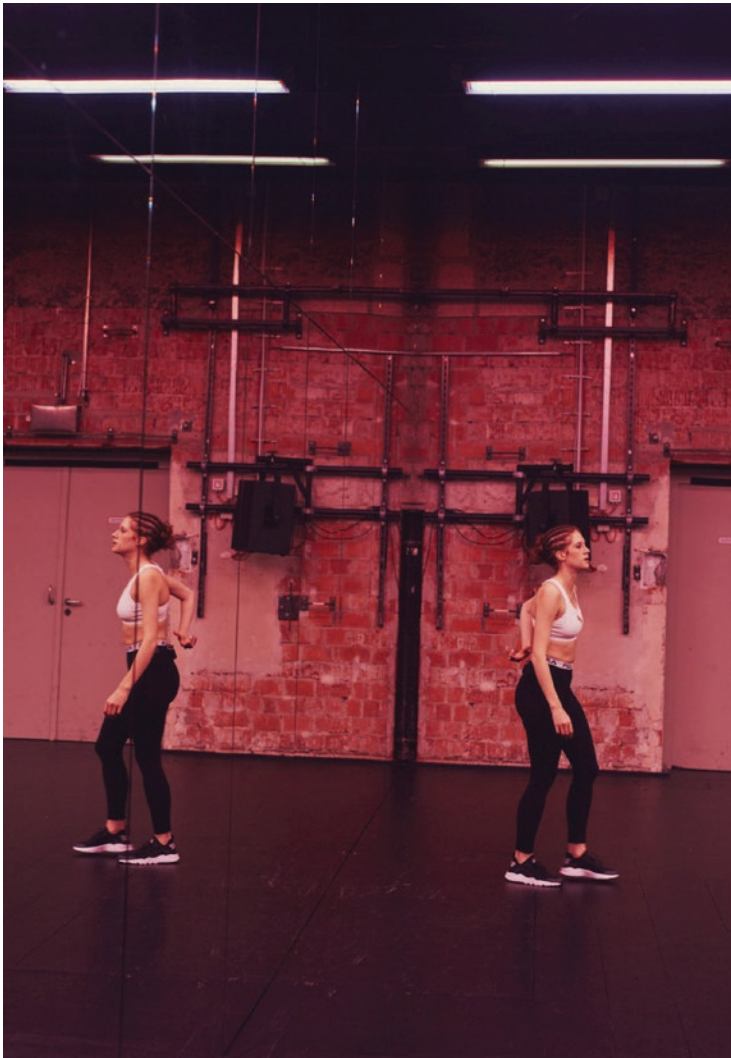
Figure 5. Spoken theatre without dialogue: Felix Rothenhäusler's The Re'search *explores the medium of language. Julia Riedler in front of the mirror wall. Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich, 2017. (Photo by Julian Baumann; courtesy of Felix Rothenhäusler)*

It remains a mystery, first, how the three players can perform together in this spoken piece without any comprehensible content, recognizable dramaturgy, or ascertainable meaning or sense. It is difficult to say how they communicate, when there seems to be no mutually agreed upon framework, no mimesis, psychology, embodiment, narration, plot, fiction, acting, or illusions. Only gradually does the play become recognizable as a kind of choreography that brings the three players into alternating constellations. They prance toward one another, get entangled with each other, and then separate again. But their movements cannot be deciphered as dance or choreographic practice; a trained observer would not be able to discern the score. Even more mysterious than their coordination and communication of the different moves and words is their ability to make contact with the audience during the approximately 50-minute performance. The evening challenges the logocentric power of imagination to an extreme degree. A mode of communication, which becomes recognizable, seems to function less by way of *what* is said and done than *how*, or even by way of what is not said in the saying and doing. It is somewhat like a dialogue between lovers who use a thousand superfluous words to express nothing but their infatuation, or the long tirades in Friedrich Schiller's pieces that, almost devoid of meaning, ultimately serve only to build tension.

With its research into people speaking within a space and the laws that govern speech, the evening is the continuation of a series of productions by Rothenhäusler that all investigate the preconditions for a text's arrival on the stage while simultaneously presenting and exploring that text. While Rothenhäusler was still studying at the Hamburg Theatre Academy, he theatrically investigated Friedrich Hölderlin's language as a foreign body in his staging of Hölderlin's 1804 *Oedipus* translation. He let the a-grammatical qualities of the translated sentences emerge, making it impossible to reduce the piece to its supposed action, its plot. Rothenhäusler perceptively picked up the theatrical research that one of his teachers, Laurent Chétouane, had carried out, but he directed the gaze more intensely than Chétouane had toward the corporeal constitution of the text onstage. The contrasting bodies of the speakers in *Oedipus* create a subtly comic contrast. In a production of Labiche's *Affair in the Rue de Lourcine*, on the other hand, Rothenhäusler consistently

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worked at brushing the piece against its grain, robbing it of its superficial comic effects by soberly slowing it down to enable the audience to focus on the play's rhetorical machinery. In both cases, Rothenhäusler was already investigating what was to become the subject of his theatrical work in *The Re'Search*: What does it mean, before any meaning or sense has been generated, for performers to step onto the stage together? What happens between them when they speak and come into contact with the audience? And what can be learned about theatre precisely at the point where a supposedly normal sequence of events has come out of step; when professionals are no longer interested in doing what they have been trained to do?

The starting point for *Re'Search* was the work done by the US video and installation artist Ryan Trecartin, which was hyped in the 2010s by stylish magazines like *Spex*. From Trecartin's similarly titled video *The Re'Search* (part of *Re'Search Wait'S*, 2009/10) comes Rothenhäusler's fragments of language but, above all, another decisive element of the evening's aesthetics and structure. In the "shuffle dramaturgy" (Buss 2016) of Trecartin's videos, Trecartin captures something that art critics say is difficult to grasp. Critics have compared Trecartin to John Waters, Andy Warhol, and Jack Smith; and described him as a "Ritalin Rembrandt," or "Édouard Manet with an iPad," or a prodigy and super talent. Trecartin himself, said to have learned about his supposed sources of inspiration only by reading his critiques, has declared that the starting point of his work is no more than an interest in "how language is used—in culture generally, whether in casual conversation or various forms of media—or by music, RV, dance, and movies."[7] Trecartin's fast-paced editing with quick cuts of mismatched pieces found all over the internet and assembled with extreme speed; his tendency to repeatedly work with the same friends and colleagues; his use of simultaneous storylines in different screens within screens, of cats, of self-promoters from sexualized short stories set in stereotypical environments, and of distorted barely comprehensible voices all seem to bear out the opinion of the *Spex* critic who said that Trecartin's videos capture "the mental state of a generation that grew up with the internet" (Buss 2016). But platitudes about the experience of the generation of digital natives bringing forth a state of mind that is ostensibly so different from the experiences of their elders actually miss the point. Instead, it is the "how" of language usage that interests Trecartin in all the aforementioned contexts. This "how" cannot be limited to one speaker, or one generation, or the present, or in spite of all appearances, the internet and altered media technology. In a montage of connected languages, Trecartin asks what constitutes individual language usage. And he discovers in that which eludes any kind of clear result the connection between all languages.

This "how" of language usage, which, if one believes the critiques, is missing in Trecartin's video, can definitely be experienced in Rothenhäusler's piece. In the latter, we become aware of a rhythm, a pleasure taken in the way words play, which unfolds on many different levels. Ultimately, over the course of almost an hour, we discover something we might be able to observe elsewhere and in other contexts, but otherwise is lost to us in our attempts to understand sense and meaning without paying attention to how they emerge. Here we are accompanying a quest that, first and foremost, understands language and movement as nothing more than a medium in which something can refer to something else: actors to one another and the audience, players and audience to the circumstances that have brought them together. This medium, which is ignored in all speaking and gesticulating, reduced to its semantics, this bare potential of speaking, this pure a-human excess, forms the network in which the three players are literally entangled—their very own intranet.

Potentiality of the Fiction of Authenticity

Boris Nikitin, Hamlet *(2016)*

The discovery of a-human excess, rest, and precondition of humanness is always related to a break with a well-known tradition. By means of a radical desubjugation, an altogether different theatre—or even something no longer called theatre—is opened up, at least according to the

7. Wikipedia, s.v. "Ryan Trecartin," last modified 24 July 2022, 22:39, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryan_Trecartin.

Figure 6. Julia*n Meding in Boris Nikitin's Hamlet. *São Paulo, Brazil, Festival MITsp (Mostra Internacional de Teatro de Sao Paulo). (Photo courtesy of Boris Nikitin)*

norms of institutions and their watchdogs (such as dramaturgs and curators). But desubjugation is in any case a critical practice, at least as understood by Michel Foucault and, following him, Judith Butler (see Foucault [1978] 1997; Butler 2002). Such a critical desubjugation, a decisive moment of resistance to those norms that establish the subject of the arts, is my third example of a theatre of potentiality: Swiss director Boris Nikitin's *Hamlet*.[8] Despite the title seeming to promise one more staging of Shakespeare's play, this *Hamlet* is in the first place an evening for the performer and vocal artist Julia*n Meding, alias Uzurukki Schmidt, the principal actor.[9]

Meding rarely stands still. He steps from one leg to the other. He bounces around, is full of a contagious restlessness, perhaps because it is nearly impossible to identify with him. I would be happier if I was not watching or listening to him at all, when, for example, he jabbers on about the blisters on his skin—which appear real. And I can't help but gravitate toward his peculiar mode of play because, while both mesmerized and repulsed, I am at the very least unable to turn away. It's difficult to say exactly what it is that draws me in and repulses me at the same time. Later, I will become aware that all of this is the result of great art, a performance with the commendable accomplishment, for starters, of knocking the audience on the head, suspending their ability to make judgments. But in the moment of watching I am not there yet. I cannot avoid feeling torn between an aesthetic fascination and an alienation at the concrete appearance of the performer. I am split in two: the clothes I wear are those of the critic, theoretician, theatre studies professor, and frequent audience member. But the naïve observer in me, who has to start by forming a picture of what is seen, notices that precisely this has been denied to me. Yes, methodically denied. For this precisely is what I see: At first glance, Meding is not remarkable, at least not really. He is a lanky man who has fixed his gaze upon us, wearing black jeans with a studded belt and a black jacket with a T-shirt underneath it that reads "Heiterkeit" (exhilaration). But there's something strange about him, and

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8. *Hamlet*, conceived and directed by Boris Nikitin. My analysis is based on the performances of 29 September 2016 at the Kaserne Basel and 3 November 2016 in the LAB Frankfurt. See also www.borisnikitin.ch/de/projekte/Hamlet.

9. In German, the "*" in Julia*n indicates playing with gender when used in nouns (which are otherwise always either masculine, feminine, or neuter)—or in this case in the name. Meding does not identify as a man or a woman, though he uses masculine pronouns.
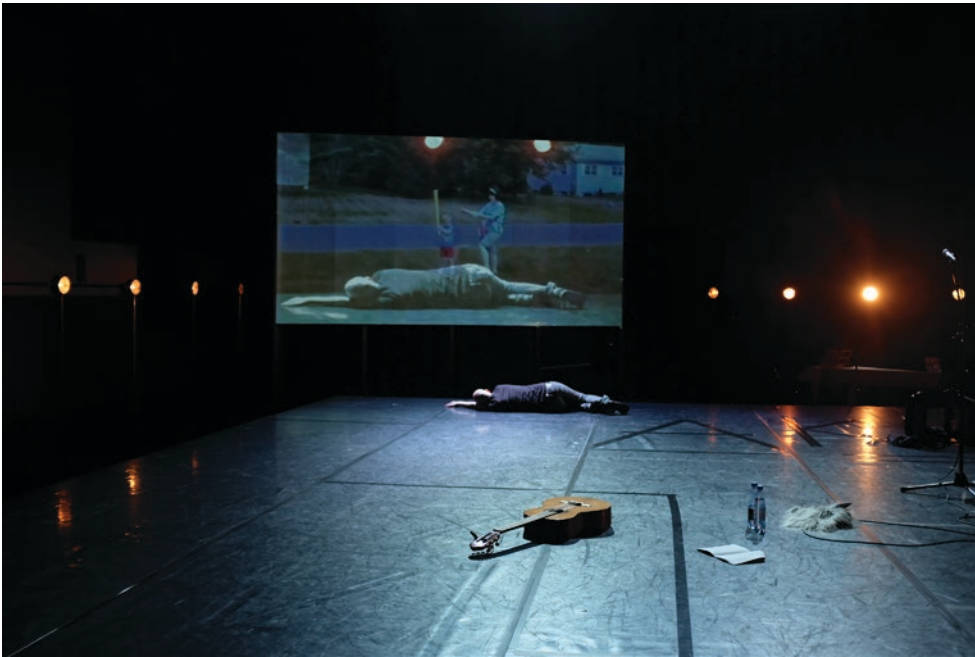
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Figure 7. Performance with one actor, musicians, guitar, bottle, and screen: Julia*n Meding in Boris Nikitin's Hamlet. *28 September 2016, Kaserne Basel. (Photo courtesy of Boris Nikitin)*

all of a sudden I realize: he has no hair, no eyebrows. Maybe that's what makes Meding seem so strange, even uncanny, to me and all of us, sitting here in front of him, while simultaneously drawing our gaze toward him.

Is this Hamlet? Is this the performer who goes by the name of Julia*n Meding? Is he both Meding and Hamlet (or neither)? Because—what a discovery—the story that he tells us seems to be a commentary on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It begins with death and the father who mutates into an image, a ghost; proceeds with delegitimizing the outsider whom the system no longer acknowledges; continues with a video of a recorded mise en abyme, a scene from children's theatre from the distant past; and ends with a song about the body of a drowning victim. Or does this story—one more footnote on the best-known play in modern theatre—only fit the play because it has been made to fit? Everything about this performer, about Julia*n Meding, seems to be construed. He is an artificial character, a literal *self-made man*, somebody who, as it seems, has worked intently on his performance, his gait, his gaze. His speech is slightly aggressive, irritatingly sluggish, with an "effeminate" tone, while his somewhat aggro, agressive appearance seems to quote the attitude of punks in the early 1980s; his tone questions the normative gender representation of the performer on an aural level in the same way as it is questioned on the visual level. His image is repeated on a projection screen behind him; we can no longer see him or his doubled image on the screen without thinking about photo montage, cinematic cuts, pixilation, cyborgs, the inseparable mixing of fact and fiction, the human and the social media machine. No matter its authenticity, the Hamlet story presented has undergone so many repetitions and reworkings that it can only sound (is only intended to sound) artificial. He is that about which aestheticians of the 18th century could only dream: his own artwork.

And thus the *Hamlet* program reveals that the text—Meding's story, his self-exposure and self-staging—was written by both him and Nikitin. We are not told where the fiction begins and where it ends, what is real and what invented, what the expression of Meding and what the invention of Nikitin. Nikitin's production constantly both expands and doubles this story. We see

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Meding on a video screen, the camera transmitting live, and the video simultaneously commenting on his appearance: he approaches us in close-ups and is cut away from in shots from the side of the stage; he is transformed into an apparition using lighting effects or displaced by other, more documentary-like material. Partway through the evening, Meding's stage performance is accompanied by a baroque quartet—three violins and a harpsichord—that play music reminiscent sometimes of Händel, sometimes of Stravinsky, sometimes of unidentifiable film music used to increase tension, but also, when we see how it is produced, of neobaroque composition, always aware of the effectivity of its own effects, exposing its production in a self-referential way. It is an evening that entrances me by literally shaking me, making me sway from side to side the way the performer sways in front of us, not only undecided about what is actually being shown to us, but also about whether what we are seeing, in its at times most intimate, repulsive, even disgusting detail, is actually what we, or rather what I, want to see and hear. It will take me some time to understand more about this experience, which at first remains ambivalent and which I would not account for if I were not trying to describe both the fascination and the disconcertment.

What is mediated by this experience in theatre is nothing less than the potential of fiction, of theatre: Meding introduces himself by name and explains that we are here in the theatre. And that the theatre has become his shelter. Because in here everything can be narrated; everything we see and hear is possibly nothing but fiction; everything becomes material. But is that really true? Is Meding protected from being exposed? Our doubts grow when he starts telling us a detailed story about the death of his father at the hospital, about the way he has been dealing with a "clinical anxiety disorder," about being on the edge of being healthy and about the way he has "pixilated" himself by shaving off the hair on his head and face. Is it possible to invent all this? He is certainly missing his hair.

Nikitin's *Hamlet* is part of a series of pieces by Nikitin, who developed his unique signature style during and after his time studying applied theatre in Gießen, and whose favorite issue is the ever-indeterminable boundary between reality and fiction. In the tradition of classical performance art and its German successors since the late 1990s—Rimini Protokoll, Hygiene Heute, Gob Squad, René Pollesch, She She Pop, and Hofmann & Lindholm—he is interested in spaces in which protagonists with different backgrounds step in, replacing the classically trained actors onstage. In pieces like Rimini Protokoll's *Shooting Bourbaki* (2002), *Sonde Hannover* (Orbiter Hannover, 2002), and *Das Kapital* (Capital, 2006),[10] or Hofmann & Lindholm's *Seancen—Versuche zur Aufhebung der Schwerkraft* (Seances—Attempts to Suspend Gravity, 2007) or *Faites vos jeux! Revoltainment* (Place Your Bets! Revoltainment, 2008; see Müller-Schöll [2014:77f]),[11] Nikitin's predecessors founded a form of documentary theatre, turning the whole world and all the people appearing in it into theatrical material. As Marcel Duchamp had turned a bottle drying rack and urinal into readymades by putting them in the museum, these artists put *Experten des Alltags* (experts of the everyday) or, as Hofmann & Lindholm call them, *Komplizen* (accomplices) onstage. Both Rimini Protokoll and Hofmann & Lindholm consider the everyday experts and accomplices to be of more interest than trained actors because they do not have so-called professional acting skills and habits at their disposal but rather their own specific skills and knowledges. Nikitin as well works with performers whom one could call experts of the everyday. But what is specific to his work is that instead of experts from reality we encounter experts from the theatre. As themselves. As others. Nikitin is interested in a complication that has been neglected by his predecessors: the fact that the "experts of the everyday," once brought to the stage, also become experts of theatre; that through rehearsals, they will have developed a certain professionalism. Therefore the authentic, natural, or undisguised paradoxically needs some sort of mise-en-scène in order to be able to appear as its opposite, as an "effect of the real" (Barthes 1984). In *Imitation of Life* (2009), Nikitin has the performer Beatrice Fleischlin explain how she learned to cry onstage. By remembering the death

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10. See their rich website with materials and videos of their works at www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/.

11. See www.hofmannundlindholm.de.

of her father she produces genuine emotions that she can use as material in the mise-en-scène. *Sei nicht du selbst* (Do Not Be Yourself, 2013) exposes professional strategies of disguise; *Sänger ohne Schatten* (Singer Without Shadow, 2014) has opera singers present their inherent body knowledge; *Das Vorsprechen* (Audition, 2015) presents the commercial exploitation of acting students at the end of their professional education. In *Das Grundgesetz* (Constitution, 2011), four different solo pieces show different ways of being onstage today in relation to laws as they apply to theatre and theatrical elements of juridical procedures. In *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (2013), Nikitin stages a service in a Mormon church. Here, as in *Hamlet*, musicians appear as musicians but also as staged coperformers. As different as the performers in Nikitin's pieces are, they are united by their distance from illusion, fiction, and representation, and at the same time by their understanding that you can't avoid illusion, fiction, and representation. They all maintain a distance from Brechtian distance. Appearing onstage under their own names, they don't pretend to appear as themselves, but rather they expose the crucial conditions of their appearance: the belief, first of all, in the fiction of the self. This belief, which leads to the effect of the real or of authenticity, is produced by nothing but the enigmatic details that in Nikitin's works point beyond the sense and meaning of the work, to moments when we understand (counterintuitively) that we haven't yet recognized the performer standing in front of us—at least not as a whole, not finally. This way, we discover in them always still hidden possibilities. If the Aristotelian tradition talked about potentiality, it always understood it as a potential activity. Quite to the contrary there is the tradition from Averroes to Agamben—via Marx, Heidegger, Benjamin, and Deleuze—that allows us to grasp a potentiality that remains in the realm of the possible despite all that is discovered in the act of the performer's playing; a potential desubjugation that from the very beginning threatens the subjugation that turns the performer onstage into the performer who appears in front of our eyes. We understand: The performer is both less and more than that *as which they appear in front of us*. It is for the sake of this discovery that Nikitin builds up his experimental arrangements. His theatre is the invitation to reflect on that which exists beyond the existing and beyond its negation. It is different from what we expect, critical in every sense of the word, and beyond the well-known.

The Anti-Instrumentalist Turn in Thinking and Artistic Practice

What unites the theorists and theatre practitioners I have cited here is the fact that they can be discussed in light of the anti-instrumentalist turn in the thinking and artistic practice of the late 1920s and early 1930s, shaping theory and the arts in the second half of the century—wherever theory and the arts were not in the service of power, ideology, or industry. The a-human excess I have traced—departing from Bataille's distinction between a limited and general economy first in Brecht's *Mahagonny*, then in the material excess of MAMAZA's dancing bodies, then in the words and gestures in Felix Rothenhäusler's *The Re'Search*, and finally in the permanent play with the fiction of authenticity in Nikitin's *Hamlet*—can be understood as the capability that remains in the realm of "pure capability," *potentia absoluta*, *dynamis* or ability, power, or communicability. Following Agamben, we then could somewhat modify the distinction between limited and general economy in line with theory from the second half of the 20th century as well as with the artistic practice of the past three decades. The excess, the expenditure, and the "general" of general economy are to be found not only and perhaps not at all in the spectacular modes of appearance that Bataille names, but rather, and above all, in the a-human excess that preserves itself as linguisticality or the "how" of human languages, as logorrhea, catachresis, gibberish, and chatter in languages, and beyond them. But also in the restless, trembling body that intervenes: that which enables and limits spectacular modes of appearance—as remainder, rest, or a-significant material—and, at the same time, as the material quality that connects the language of humanity with the language of things and language as such (see Müller-Schöll 2019). To Bataille's far too general concept of the theatre as excess or expenditure we would need to add, not least with a view to the theoreticians and theatre practitioners mentioned above, that theatre only belongs to general economy to the extent that it never understands the means of its presentation—its languages and bodies—as a pure instrument,

even if the artists have the best political intentions. But rather, theatre is always, first and foremost, means without ends, that which escapes usage while being used, and thus, with regard to its own potentiality, that which points to futures unknown to us and always still to come.

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