

RESPONSIVE LISTENING

THEATER TRAINING FOR
CONTEMPORARY SPACES

Edited by Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk
and Karmenlara Ely

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Responsive Listening:

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Introduction

Karmenlara Ely and Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk

The Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA) at Østfold University College has built its reputation by questioning conventional theater practices and challenging normative ideas on methods of acting and scenography within a theater education. For many years NTA has focused on research as a driving force of our BA educations in acting and scenography. This has led us to high levels of both student and teacher experimentation, drawing on methods from the various art fields in order to create an original interdisciplinary methodology that places education between the traditions of the skill-based conservatory and studio-based art scholarship. In 2015, NTA founded the first and only MA in Scenography in Scandinavia out of our commitment to deepen the connection between theory and practice. The acting program at NTA, as highlighted by this volume, educates actors as creative artists able to both interpret others' works while developing their own original art practice, ranging from theater to performance art to all genres in-between. Throughout the three-year BA program, our teaching targets the development of each student's particular talents and interests. Graduates refer to themselves as actors, "stage artists," performance artists, or simply artists, a reflection perhaps of our interdisciplinary approach and also the type of work our students create, which is manifold. Our scenographers, likewise, pursue a range of expression when creating a space for the street,

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stage, or for an exhibition. Their goal is not to “decorate a stage,” but to manifest an architectural and sensory potential for unfolding events. Crossing between different media, these scenographers invent their own approaches to architecture and experience as fluid responses to a given situation. This involved approach influences acting practices by generating a live and present dialogue between bodies in space.

Located at Østfold University College, one hour south of the Norwegian capital Oslo, in the small town of Fredrikstad, NTA holds a peripheral place in relation to the center of theater in Norway. For many years, NTA held the role of the “alternative” acting program in the country, as compared to the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo, which for around forty years served as the only acting program in the country. NTA today represents the interdisciplinary and experimental branch of contemporary theater training. This placement in relation to mainstream academia has provided us with a certain amount of freedom to test out and develop various pedagogies without interference. Our students benefit greatly from the workshops led by a wide range of visiting international artists and pedagogues, experts in the field who continue to influence the school’s working methods as a reflection of active art practices in educational development. Theater education at NTA aligns itself with a historical avant-garde lineage, drawing on century-old traditions rooted in an interdisciplinary art field that is more strongly connected with popular theater traditions than its well-known literary counterpart. Working in the twenty-first century, however, often implies beginning with a dramatic text—or any kind of text—as much as from a devised, sensory, physical, or visual point of departure.

Introduction

Since 2003, after rising from its beginnings as a school for object-related theater, NTA has placed itself at the cultural foreground of intense interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary stage art. The Academy is always researching what kinds of methodologies might best support and serve contemporary experimentation within performing practices on global stages. This journey has taken our research and practice from what has been labelled “physical theater,” through work with dance- and conceptual theater, to more recent research drawing on socially engaged art practices, relational strategies, and musicality and compositional approaches to theater making. To this end, scenographers and actors work closely together in conceptualizing and evolving projects as part of a collaborative process. Today at NTA, the actor is not the center of the work, nor is the director or scenographer; it is the space between creative elements and audiences that is embraced. The emphasis has always been to teach students to observe and interact with the relationship between practice and theory, art, and society.

This publication is a reflection on the foundational aspects of the pedagogy evolving through both our faculty- and student-led research. All practices at NTA begin in response to a space, celebrating scenography and acting as mutually dependent disciplines that shape and challenge each other critically. In this volume, the Artistic Director of Scenography, Serge von Arx, reflects on the nature of scenography as it informs his approach to the crucial shaping of a total education. Authors Electa Behrens, Øystein Elle, Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk, and the Artistic Director of Acting, Karmenlara Ely, reflect on the acting program and its various training modules, which are based on intensifying

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sensory awareness, transposable musicality, and rhythm, each crucial aspects of ensemble and performance. Karen Kipphoff contributes a photo essay that documents examples of the meeting point between the two programs, and two alumni authors, Veronika Bökelmann and Ivar Furre Aam, speak about their time as NTA students.

Our on-going research and development training is a practical means of activating inspiration in students of contemporary theater, which also includes the study of such subjects as contemporary philosophy, critical theory, sound, and relationality. Our theoretical tendencies lean toward discourses on listening, presence, sound, sensory relations to material and things, and composition in space and time. Much of this work reflects a contemporary thinking around subjectivity, with an aim of finding new and sustainable ways to understand our selves and our relation to the world in which we live and create. Whether we are working with text, creating inventive dramaturgies, improvising, or composing physical actions and movement on stage, the ability to listen and pay attention to resonances are, ultimately, what we rely upon to establish multiple layers of meaning in our material; these are the keys to developing melodies, rhythms, tones of expression. We focus on introducing our students to a number of well-known methodologies, choosing not to rely on any one in particular, as a way to have the students engage all possible influences while constantly questioning both methodology and aesthetics, in the hope that they develop their own.

Yielding to the Unknown: Actor Training as Intensification of the Senses

Karmenlara Ely

A performer's unique skill is in the art of not just invention, but response. It is therefore also necessary for the actor to investigate the world at the most intimate level of sensory practice, to discover what action implies. Even in Hamlet's essential dilemma, it is not just enough to ask the question what it means to be, but what the implications of action are. Theatrical action is framed by the global stage, where drama and representation have material impact (i.e. the effects of racism, bullying, warfare) while using complex devices of media and spectacle. On today's stages we are confronted with the efficacy of live action, and the implications of face-to-face relation. We make this clunky thing called "Theater" in an age of glossy production, digital prosthesis, viral media. We are human bodies that age, decay, feel pain and joy, and experience many things. How do we reflect on and share the failure and delight of the experience of the human being through the theater, without pandering to audiences or relying on emotional pornography? It's not enough to train actors to be vessels for great authors or directors. Actors as creative agents must both listen to their complex surroundings in order to respond to them, and in turn help us, their audience, re-encounter the world.

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As practitioners we are presented with a problem: how to make theater that invites dialogue and intimacy through critical images and dynamic, sensory, spatial relationships. We seek theater where the bodies of all participants, spectator and performer, are acknowledged in space, via the senses, as being fully present and not “always-already departed,” somewhere else. We live in a time where we are double-booked, asked to be multiple, and late. How then do we meet our audiences as collaborators, and bring to them the feeling of being invited, embraced, implicated, responsible? Here and present, capable of shared dreaming?

Conventional twentieth century representational modes like method acting or psychodramatic storytelling (each relying on the idea of a “4th wall”) sometimes allow the audience to become too comfortable, despite how well a somewhat fixed world has been masterfully created by the actors. Championing this standard, or any standard, by itself sets limitations for training a contemporary performer seeking continually relevant staging, especially those who want an active, critical audience. It is a demand of many contemporary artists to interrogate the work they make as they are making it, in its process, as they struggle with form and content. African-American artist Adrian Piper, for example, uses the phrase “indexical present”¹ to describe a phenomenon in her work that draws critical attention to the moment, forming a social-political consciousness.

1 In “Shaivistic Reverberations: Exchanges Between Adrian Piper and Adelaide Bannerman,” Bannerman states that, “Piper’s work has consistently examined the relationships between the individual and the illusions that constitute realities that structure and shape our experiences of this world. She has done this primarily through her concept of the ‘indexical present’ (i.e., self-scrutiny of behavior in the moment it occurs) and its function within her installations and performance-related works. Her intent is to mobilize the type of self-examination that can transform consciousness and evoke changes to how one perceives the world and other individuals” (Bannerman 27).

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But its relevance goes beyond the topic of insidious sexism and racism she raises with her piece, *My Calling Card*: an indexical present calls us to reflect on how we act as we are acting. It asks us to reserve a space for critique not after, but during, the scene. To wake up, even if just for a moment.

The most interesting contemporary actors today, utilizing various methods and approaches, are calling their own presence into question. Postmodern dramaturgies have long been playing with form, and asking the actor to reimagine the dialectic space between that which is “me” and “not me” in a text or character task. Performers are even working outside that very dialectic as a direct challenge to the idea of a knowable “me” altogether. When entering a training process we are inherently asking the question of “how to act,” or how to reflect on acting. It may be that technique is not the answer to this question, but that the answer is a reflexive opening of the question itself and provides an approach. In research-based acting practices, we can question reality as well as explode it, in the hopes of opening up other platforms of experience. Audiences want to see the actor struggle artfully with the very situation of theater, as illustrated by the influential work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma. Actors want to tell different stories than what is inherited from the archive.

Tethered to the mechanics of modernism, “systems” for actor training still inform many institutional expectations for the stage: rules for how it’s done and not done, limitations in scoring and embodying text. The contemporary performing artist in an institution meets an interesting challenge when training freely across a variety of approaches. She becomes an actor without a master, responsible for researching, choosing, and experimenting

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with performance strategies to meet the work at hand. This challenges one to treat each project and space as unique, working through the senses and one's humanity. The unanswered questions of how to act and how to reflect on acting demand a continual ear in relation to the moment.

Action

While aspects of a personal journey and a relationship with the self are important to any artistic process, training at Norwegian Theatre Academy does not center around the inner life of the actor as an ideal. How do we destabilize and problematize the idea of the actor, while also calling what we do actor training? The answer partly has to do with how we define or understand *action*. The actor is the one (of several or many) who sets things in motion, who makes things happen in social space. This motion carries with it the implication of responsibility, calling one to consciousness and conscientiousness. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* describes the open and unpredictable nature of action as a consequence of human freedom: by acting, we are free to start processes and bring about new events, but no actor has the power to control the meaning or consequences of his or her deeds. Every act sets in motion an unlimited number of actions and reactions without end. As Arendt puts it: "The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end" (233). Theatrical action with reflective capacities calls upon not just consciousness of social problems or justice, but also theatrical materials, theatrical time, expenditure, and exchange. Suzanne Jaeger, in *Staging Philosophy*, writes, "Stage presence can be defined as an active configuring and reconfiguring of one's intentional grasp in response

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to an environment. It is to be aware of the uniqueness of a particular audience and of certain features of a theatrical event rather than performing a perfect repetition of a familiar and well-rehearsed pattern of behavior" (122). So it stands that stage presences, or the state of being "awake" and not en-tranced by the idea of one's own acting or an obsession with perfecting one's self in front of an audience, demands an actor be playful and open in his or her collaboration with the audience. Theater practice imagined with the actor as creator/responder creates vivid and dynamic structures for play, inviting others into our rich dream worlds and aiming at shared dreaming, co-creating (rather than dramatic situations meant to showcase the actor's brilliance).

So then what is the acting "self"? The concept may be more poetically understood as a volatile sensory resonance than as an object of knowledge or a thing to be trained. Jean-Luc Marion, in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, describes the self in a way we can compare with Arendt's notion of action, as one's ethical collaboration with the unknown. The self is experienced, he says, as arriving from "elsewhere," always in possibility and in suspension, rather than in given objects and known certainties (71). As an actor, I often experience myself as a crisis, without ground. What gives me agency, gives me selfhood, is the leap inherent in the action of giving over fully to the other (giving my time, my listening, my expressions, my desire). In this way, writes Marion, I am put "on stage," through my surrender to the inevitable failure to know what will happen in advance. Surrendering to the spiral of ephemeral process actually helps me emerge. Being the first to love, for example, is an action, a subjectivity, that, from a state of poverty and belief, allows the other to appear. It is generous. You could say one engages the self

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by the throwing of oneself fully into the possibilities of a space, which answers the call of a space while providing the creation of another call. The self in this configuration is not my own, fully, but it is the action I am responsible for. My being emerges in response to a call both from within and from outside, like sound, dissipating again in time. I exist, briefly, in a state of surrender, and this vulnerability demands care, the kind engendered in the state of listening, which actor training privileges. It's not an inherently "nice" or "good" state of being, but a turning toward the other that demands everything of the senses and throws time outside the capitalist system of use-value. We are interested in generating dialogue, not manufacturing skilled artists as products or generating theater works that act merely as expressions of institutional authority.

Alterity and Difference

The acting program at the Norwegian Theater Academy at Østfold University College teaches foundations of acting while actively questioning technique and experimenting with contemporary approaches to theater and performance. We teach actors who work in a variety of media, text being only one of many potential scenic materials in a process. Training at NTA feels at times like a crisis of self: the work is not constructed to simply validate or help solidify one's comfort with the known world. The skills one acquires through this education can be described as a highly tuned awareness of the possibilities of theater and its collaborative mechanisms, including awareness of the role of audiences. The education does not aim to elevate the cult of the individual performer, nor does it idealize utopian ensemble. Workshops in diverse performance practices confront students with

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challenges that expand the notion of the self while also teaching ensemble problem solving skills—yet simultaneously deconstruct ideals in both. Visuality, sound, and other scenographic expressions play a large role in the dramaturgical process and inform performers' approaches via sensory intertwining. The senses are activated in every practice to ally the performer with a space, continually, through workshops with dramaturgies formed by and experimenting with the interactive qualities of breath, sound, listening, rhythm, partnering, objects, texts, and other materials.

In addition to theater productions and workshops, students engage in daily or weekly skill-based activities that familiarize them with their breathing, their anatomy (both imagined and experienced), and their sonic potential by way of text work, singing, yoga, contact improvisation, and dancing. The overlap of different approaches and cultural views often challenge the foundations of the very skills they are learning, so the notion of one true path or “way” is exchanged for something more fluid. NTA values the wisdom of rhythm and breath, as both have the ability to communicate various archives movement, text, and song forms are crucial to experience, and arrive from a range of sources. If training actively upsets the familiar and introduces competing rhythms, or other “centers” of breathing or movement, we may be able to challenge the stability of the “self” and call the human being out of her home and into a broader relationship with space. Singing practice is yet another study area joining our expansive, sensory approach: students work with musicality and embodiment through a wide range of song and sound sources.²

2 Extended vocal technique is regularly taught in various settings and is one of the influential practices that inform the expressive landscape at NTA.

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Challenging actors with the unfamiliar—through confrontations with various aesthetic environments, tasks, compositions, and games—consistently engages the actor’s responsiveness. This is not an easy process. “Deep play”³ is a crucial element in the devising process. High expenditures of energy and experimental risk often operate without immediate return; for this reason, we articulate that failure is a necessary step in the maturation process of any performing artist. Laboratories and projects draw from a wide-ranging network of international artists who work theatrically, for example, with texts, sound, media composition, ensemble-devising processes, and choreographic methods. The workshops are curated to confront students with various working methods and alternative ways of conceiving the role of artistic practice in life. They come face-to-face with processes that demand from them precisely what they do not know how to do, or who to be. Confirmation of results, critical support, and feedback therefore need to be given in context, as a response to specific spaces and aims, though never in generalized terms (e.g. *good* or *bad* acting, “believability”). Reflection on the results, then, is a responsibility shared by student and teacher; it’s a critical means to carry forward knowledge, methodologies, and values discovered in the practical research on both sides. Acting students do however repeatedly meet an artist’s process as a direct challenge to their own need to completely understand and “know” the

3 From Clifford Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures*, in his “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” where he applies Jeremy Bentham’s concept of “deep play.” By this he means play “in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all.” From the perspective of artists who value play it is the intensity of this risk and its ability to heighten potentially transformative (or disappointing) experiences that confirms, somehow, the meaning and resonance of group action.

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process. Knowledge is a critical and tenuous product: it is not always the goal of an experience. The pursuit or illusion of knowledge can in fact close down the possibility for communication. One could ask, rather, “What is otherwise than knowledge?”—especially considering an art form based on responsive relations to people in public space. Contemporary theater practices offer a space to also resist the “knowledge imperative” of institutions, offering instead what Katherin Busch refers to as a “poetics of knowledge,”⁴ or perhaps what Bataille in his book *Inner Experience* refers to as “nonknowledge”: something like the burst of experience in the present moment of encounter. In this burst, the material outcome is contextual, sensorial, and embodied, emerging in relation. Learning is a reflection on and communication of seemingly ineffable experience (rather than only the pursuit of knowledge or representation systems). Attention to “nonknowledge” reshapes how we approach cultural critique and evolving perceptions of how expenditures of time and space influence people.

Acting training can confront and destabilize the idea that there is an authentic self which can be trained to do theater a particular way; there is no single, correct, unified “I” the education is trying to serve or produce, but rather asks students to remain in question throughout a rigorous practice of tangible and practical *seeking*. Working without a single grand instructional method demands the acting

4 Busch articulates a shared critical stance towards knowledge production in academia, where the demand for systems and useable knowledge products reflects a problematic market economy influencing research-based creative fields. She writes: “[I]n view of a steadily growing knowledge imperative, it is necessary to recall the theoreticians who refuse to restrict themselves to functioning as suppliers of knowledge, who view knowledge itself with great skepticism, and who see even their own theories as an inherent practice of knowledge criticism.” I similarly see those who teach acting practice to hold a critical relationship to technique.

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student be a thinking, curious person, unsure about the outcome of their experimentation.

Questioning Technique

Coming out of a century of theater manifestos and conflicting directorial styles, acting technique as a product of education has gone through many circular developments, with multiple interpretations and cults, each with their own living or dead charismatic leaders. It should be said that what it means to “act” or “perform” well in the European or American context changes with economic and cultural shifts. International trends might be critically described as not so subtly borrowed (even pilfered) styles, stories, tools, and vocabularies from other cultures and heralded as “new,” or imperial “discoveries.” There is nothing innocent about the history of actor training or its role in institutions. The fetish of the “new” and “yet unseen genius” drives a certain kind of art practice within a capitalist model, which is problematic: in some cases, institutions are inviting students to submit themselves to a physical, social, and psychological process that analyzes their personal habits and emotional tendencies along critical lines better suited to trends in the art market. Acceptance into an acting school is viewed as a stamp of approval signifying “natural talent” and symbolizing readiness to be shaped into a useful, consumable commodity. This sentiment is something to resist. A reflective and conscious theater education cannot promise new and improved *selves* as the end result of contemporary actor training, nor can it succeed by focusing training on a fixed notion of what it means to “become an actor.”

We must, rather, lead students in a collaborative discovery of creative tools, methods, and potentials for

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the theater—demonstrating a set of shared values based on communication through trial and error, repetition and research. This begins by being curious about the “bad habits” students typically bring to their education. Students can learn from their own postures as much as we can train them. Institutions are responsible for teaching historicized critical discourse around the art forms being taught so students can critique and collaborate on the shape and direction of training. It is our students who lead us into “new” territory, which is sometimes discovered to be “old,” and this circuit of recycling, rediscovery, trade, and re-invention can be a conscious, critical relationship with history and productivity. The appearance of any actual “new” material is perhaps what we refer to as the “unknown”: a core aspect of live art and presence. *We are here together now, something unpredictable and surprising can and will happen.* This is invited. Education might not teach people to know what is unpredictable in live encounter, but at NTA we aim to teach artists to provoke its appearance. We demand an ethics protecting the unscripted relational experiences at the center of theater. To preserve a space for the unknown is to resist inscribing upon the actor a certain finished, commodified, or systematized “self,” one that is sculpted, constructed, or shaped as a mechanism of interpretation. Instead, our education seeks to strengthen and support the surprise, the yet-to-be resonance that activates the potential in the human being. By fortifying the student with material tools, critical questions, and space for developing responsive, sensory musicality, acting students acquire a wider mobility. They develop the ability to listen well enough to collaborate and respond—to co-creators, audiences, architectures, landscapes, literatures—without

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foreclosing further listening. This is not “a technique,” but a process of acquiring and inventing context-specific skills that can also be dropped and re-engaged in time.

Liminality and Self

An alternative to the convention of character emerged in the postmodern performance context: “performance of self,” as in everyday life. This also references a theoretical discourse arriving from Erving Goffman’s text of the same name. The interest in performing the real, via playing oneself, or at least playing “with,” has already informed several generations of actors. But what are we asking when we claim to simply perform the “self,” when the self is not at all a singularity or even wholly available as a knowable object, out of relation with history, place, or alongside other people? Can we really work with such an idea in our training when it is clearly been destabilized by critical theory? How can I train to perform my “self”? How can I do anything else?

I raise this issue to articulate a way of thinking about the concept of “self” inside contemporary actor training (not to detail methods of self-scripting). One of the inspiring principles we might use to describe the training process at NTA is the theory of *liminality*, brought into performance studies by Victor Turner and his work with ritual studies. Liminal is a term taken from the root word *limen*, which Richard Schechner describes as “a threshold or sill, an architectural feature linking one space to another—a passageway between places rather than a place in itself. A *limen* is often framed by a *lintel*, which outlines the emptiness it reinforces. In performance theory, *liminal* refers to ‘in-between’ actions or behaviors...” (67).

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Liminality is a well-known principle in performance and theater studies and is used in a variety of fields.⁵ The liminal as a concept is very useful when thinking not only about performance practice, but as a space for the idea of self in actor training. We do not view the actor as a concrete, known entity. (Just as the person in society experiences themselves as both strange and familiar.) Neither are we playing only with the notion of the fragmented subject, but rather something more like the transitional space well described in the definition of liminal. We can think of the actor's work as play within that space, for sure, but must also consider that the actor herself is such a space; she is full of potentials and unknowns, temporary transformations and full-on becomings. The actor is always wrestling with the space between "me/not me," or throwing out the dialectic altogether, even offstage. What remains concrete is the frame: the limen itself as described above, realized as the materiality of the body, the vibration of senses, an expressive vocal instrument. In an effort not to overly fetishize the actor's body, we also create work where the actor can be corporeally "absent" and yet remain an essential agent in a space. The materiality of experience and the sensory landscape of the actor is but a base tool for experimentation and partnering with other human beings. For this reason, the liminal space is a necessary ethos of our training, where the intensification of the senses meets the potential for encounter. In relation to a text, the actor performs a set of tasks, actions, gestures, sounds, and supporting dramaturgical perspectives without resolving who the "I" is, instead exploring a range of potential

5

See Susan Broadhurst's research in her book *Liminal Acts*, for example.

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personhoods. The frame of this continuum could also be thought of as a slide or a range, from “acting” to “not acting,” evoking Michael Kirby’s influential research on matrixed and non-matrixed performances.⁶ The range of potential Kirby articulates is explored without necessarily relying on knowledge of “who I am” or “why I am who I am”—rather, I interact with the precariousness of experience. What unfolds is a collaboration with time in relation to text, character, a partner, space. In the act of composition, I can critique and reshape my own behavior as action.

Relation and Meaning

Our education aims to generate a vocabulary of spatial orientation. We ask performers to listen, as a primary action. Performer approaches adjust and shift in the moment of collaboration; they do not ally themselves with a “proper technique,” but develop in response to the situation at hand. Listening is not about privileging one form of aesthetic input/output over another, be it noise or poetry. Articulation of sensory experience means bringing awareness to the performing moment—the timbre of sounds, the taste of words, the color of light—and making something with them. We also play with synaesthetic tendencies by tasting color in words and describing the temperature of sounds. None of these sensations need to be translated to psychological scores to be effective.

Jean-Luc Nancy, in his text *Listening*, draws our attention to listening as a curiosity and a way into caring for the open materiality of experience. He calls for a space of relation that is not about trading in coded meaning or

6 *On Acting and Not Acting*, Michael Kirby.

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brilliant ideas, but in the already available resonance of the senses and shared spatial experience. This resonance is of great importance to our practice as theater makers and precedes the demand to only construct easily translatable worlds. Listening demands a suspension in time and care for that which is unknown, but given as material, if only ephemerally. Listening is not just attending to the words of the other, but to the gift of sound itself.

One might think of intensification of the senses as learning dynamic, spatial improvisation. We play with the potential musicality in all expressions, without relying on meaning or interpretation, yet still investigating relation. Meaning makes itself evident locally in different ways, without our signature. It precedes us and disappears. We do not have to “create” it or represent it. One illustration from metaphysics on the way in which relation generates both tender and dangerous material can be drawn from philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, where the notion of sensory encounter is crystalized as an ethical relation: whenever the face speaks, “the first content of expression is the act of expression in itself” (51). The face of the other demands response, and this demand is at the root of drama. Attending the face of the other—i.e. *listening*—draws up a world of responsive sensory material and improvisational problems for the actor while generating interesting crises onstage. Actors must learn to play with the flexibility of text, voice, body, and the rhythm of interacting with the space or a partner as part of their research, even in more rigorous compositions. In the best examples, this produces a state of intense, live collaboration with all the elements of the stage.

Acting students at NTA are also trained to respond with sonorous improvisation in their actions. A text or

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performance score may be, for example, playfully perforated through subtle awareness of its potential musicality. This can take the form of rhythmic intervention, tonal shifts, or playing with breath, as Electa Behrens and Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk elaborate on in their essays in this book. The actor responds creatively to the moment with improvisation, at every level a kinetic response, not in a frozen format but as a flexible dialogue. This responsiveness is valued far beyond any notion of one's perfect execution of a task or clarity of so-called "meaning." That said, our improvisation is intense enough (and scoring, choreography, and repetition practiced enough) that we can expect our actors' compositional choices to be dramaturgically rooted and reflective of invested research.

Our Approach and Intentions

Training at NTA seeks to enable actors to be responsive to a space, to know what's going on in a room and relate to it, both in terms of technical data (light, sound, sensory material) but also in terms of its live potential. An actor in our education does not have to be interested in politics or political art, but must be conscious of the implications of his or her actions, both on the human and non-human scale. Acting education at NTA asserts no expectation that the actor become more or less believable, or selfless, or that he or she becomes "a better person" after having experienced the process of acting. These are but peripheral qualities we might experience. We are much more interested in how the repeated challenge of being confronted with "that which is other than you" makes for a more interesting, playful, and dangerous stage, one that can better deal with the future potentials of theater more concretely.

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Contemporary theory on performance articulates in a rich language ways of conceiving the actor inside a range of postmodern and post-dramatic theater processes so varied that each cannot be summarized here. The intention of this essay is not to situate or outline actor-training history, but to reflect on some principles informing our acting program at Norwegian Theater Academy/Østfold University College. This reflection is a perspective directly connected to this author's leadership period at NTA. It is worthwhile to note, however, the historical influences in our educational thinking over the long term, ranging from Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud to Hans Thies-Lehmann, Michael Kirby, and Richard Schechner, who's canonical statuses demonstrate that a critical line of inquiry into acting methodologies is nothing new. Phillip Zarrilli's book *Acting (Re)Considered* is an excellent example of a resource that reflects on the discourses of the contemporary field and their historicization. (Zarrilli has been a guest teacher at the school.) Contemporary training that relies on the legacy of key figures like Jacques Lecoq, Jerzy Grotowski, Sanford Meisner, or Michael Chekhov, for example, has certainly impacted teachers working with our students, but we do not hew to nor endorse any of these traditions specifically. Many key figures in the fields of postmodern dance and music/sound art have taught at NTA; both fields are deeply connected to our work with actors, particularly in regards to text. The methodologies of influential artists and companies such as Robert Wilson, Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška of Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Sxip Shirey, Bianca Casady of CocoRosie, Heiner Goebbels, Romeo Castellucci, Herbert Fritsch, Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment, Jay Scheib, Louise Höjer, Tino Sehgal, Joshua Sofaer, Ong Keng Sen,

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Edit Kaldor, Hans van den Broek, Frank Vercruyssen and tg STAN, Goat Island, Wooster Group, Kirsten Dehlholm and Hotel Pro Forma, Baktruppen, Verdensteatret, Verk, Alan Lucien Øyen and Winter Guests, Xavier Le Roy, and Meg Stuart, for example, inform the artists and dramaturgies of many of our workshops and projects. Many of the above artists have also taught for us.

At NTA, we have built an education around the notion of an unknown “center.” This moving, transformative space is generated through our deep relationship with theory and mixed practices. This, we feel, is a generous and exciting response to the long history of styles and critiques we have inherited. We have not chosen one master to follow, but allow for the polyphonic and polyvocal, including resonances of modern and contemporary critiques of the theater, music, and visual arts, where practices and methodologies move in and out of focus in varying durations and intensities. We also do not place the actor at the center, but challenge each student to preserve that space for the work itself, in what ways they see fit. This does not mean the actor is unimportant; on the contrary, we envision and work within the idea of actor-as-creator. What or who they are changes with the work they choose to create, and through the ensembles they create and disband. What happens after graduation can be witnessed by our students’ many performances, installations, theater plays, and events appearing in Norway and on the international stage. In short, their work speaks for itself.

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On Scenography

Serge von Arx

Scenography as such does not exist. It is agency, consisting of invisible relationships between spatially and temporally active constituents. It is a catalyst, rendering the hidden visible, or obscuring what we believe to see and know. A space is only the starting point of an avalanche set to occur in the spectators' imaginations. What exists inside things, behind things, and in-between things is as relevant as the immediate appearance of a space beset with objects. Scenography is ephemeral, yet must always refer back to something, be it a text, a piece of music, a movement, an object, or an idea. There is no scenography without a linking anchor, and it is the anchor's position in relation to a referent notion that creates its inherent dialogue. The volume, color, and spirit of this dialogue are the scenographer's tools. Scenography's main concern, though, is potentiality; relationships are set as frames around an unknown, to be filled by the spectators' imaginations. This makes the scenographer an architect of the illusory, defining space by adding or removing components; in this way, the scenographer takes charge of an emptiness, a void, but one so "loaded" that it is constantly on the brink of exploding or imploding. The scenographer does not create new worlds, but rather creates a vibration in space using critical thought, reflecting on the decomposition and recomposition of realities. The notion of the "new" becomes obsolete when one transcends time-based characteristics, moving from the diachronic to the synchronic. Everything is

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already available; existing relationships are merely shaped, redefined.

Performance is inherently bound to our physical condition as human beings. While most human activity strives to change our environment even by artificially expanding, accelerating, and enhancing our bodies, we remain locked up in our unchangeable somatic condition. This is where performance comes in as a linking intermediary. We perceive performances with all senses; the articulate balance between the visual, the acoustic, the haptic, and even the olfactory represents the compositional aim of a performing artist. While in most other art fields there is a clear focus on one or the other sensorial aspect, in the performing arts the artist intrinsically operates with the coherence of those respective constituents. This holistic character makes performance not only more easily accessible for everyone but can also be of referential interest to a broad field of cultural industries. Performance takes its essence from our everyday reality; the present and past worlds constitute its vocabulary. The artistic agent insists on decomposing and de-contextualizing our environment and history, and subsequently recomposing and re-contextualizing it. The according levels of fragmentation and re-relation represent the creative act.

Architecture is, like theater and music, a *time-based* art form. But in contrast to music and theater, where the artwork consists of a clear definition of the evolvment in time, architecture merely *frames* the time. The architect, rather, creates the *potential* for a visitor to experience a work, unfolding upon his or her own *free will*. We have the freedom to determine how we move through a city: we can choose where to go, how fast to go, where to look, what to

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interact with—but only to some degree, as that freedom is restricted by more or less clearly defined frames. And it is those very frames of which an architect or scenographer's work consists. While architecture usually follows functional, practical, legal, or in general more rational criteria, it is theater that turns architecture into scenography. (I am using the often confusing and culturally varying term "scenography" in its essential meaning of "writing space or stage," expanding it beyond mere stage design and into the realms of exhibition design, art in the public environment, etc., which is how we understand and teach it at the Norwegian Theatre Academy.) Maybe one could say scenography is architecture that inheres a clear *dramaturgical* momentum, architecture as occasion, referring to the full complexity of what is meant by dramaturgy. In this simplified context we might use "dramaturgical" to refer to a story or dramatic composition following one or more distinct paths along a timeline of more or less defined structures and properties. In most works of the performing arts these stories are linear and realistic, but they can be surrealistic, concrete, or even abstract. In whatever way one reads dramaturgy, it is an open practice, and allows for different interpretations by the performers, even if the timely development of the performance itself, as witnessed by the audience, remains fixed in a linear setting.

Scenography inherently concerns itself with nonlinear, spatial storytelling, not as an option but fundamentally, according to its inner structure. Architecture is experienced as it unfolds in space, according to the moving body and changing light. An architect or a scenographer's main tool is *materialization*—building spatial limits, fixed or movable ones, transparent, translucent, or opaque ones, using colors

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and surfaces, each constituent reacting differently to light, sound, touch. It is on purpose that I am blurring a differentiated approach to both fields, as in their essence architecture and scenography are one in the same. However, architecture can be non-materialized as well. Architecture can be created through music, through scent, or even through a change of temperature. Scenography, then, is sensory storytelling expressed through architecture, storytelling one experiences with one's whole body in space. It merges the inherent realness of architecture and the inescapable artificiality of theater, and it is this intrinsic collision that nurtures scenography as an interesting chimera.

In my eyes there is a big lack within contemporary architecture: that of the scenographical as described above, the lack of theater, of theatricality, of nonlinear storytelling. We have to find our way back to utilizing the city as our main stage of everyday life. The city must allow for scenographical events to take place, rather than attempt creating events with architecture (like with Gehry).

To observe and listen—and perhaps this is the most important point for us to teach art students—if you carefully listen to and observe what is happening around you, you realize everything you need is already available. Instead of constantly trying to create the new, as we have created so much already, which we are about to succumb to, I think our focus should foremost be on what we have already created, while identifying ways to deal with those elements. This doesn't mean taking a *phase admirative* approach, a gaze in admiration of what we have accomplished, but observing the resulting outcomes, the consequences of what we have created. If the reason we create art is to “ask questions,” then the essence of the work lies in what we receive back, in

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terms of dialogue. And theater is always a dialogue; it does not exist without an audience. When constantly creating, we risk not perceiving what has already been done; this is the point when the artist's responsibility lies in "reminding society what it has chosen to forget" (cf. Arthur Miller).

Art for me is about framing the unknown, finding the perfect balance between establishing a frame while keeping the limits as open as possible. Be it a theater piece, a sculpture, a poem, or a film, it is the unknown which is filled by our imagination, and hence what makes the reading of any art work personal, allowing us to relate it. If I cannot relate to it, it is irrelevant to me. It is essential that the artist insinuate a bridge between the work and the spectator. I believe this is true for all the arts, but especially for architecture. Where a spatial definition allows for only one way to go and look, it is the architect's hegemonic obtrusion. The architect, rather, should contribute to the fields of gravity of public space. The theater director, on the other hand, juggles the constituents of theatrical work—the space, the text, the music, and other elements of a performance. If he or she begins to fill that fragile unknown area between—the "public space" within a performance—while defining how things are lined up on a timeline, the potential for our imagination begins to decrease. The theater director should weave the components into each other while still maintaining a space for the unknown, just as the architect should do in the city. I've often thought stage directors should spend some time working in urban development, while architects experience work in the theater—if this happened, perhaps the divisions between them might begin to overlap more; the beneficiaries of this experience would be the audience.