

**The Rock, the
Butterfly, the Moon,
and the Cloud**
Notes on
Dramaturgy in
an Ecological Age

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We are not just with the earth, with the stars, with ground, with blood, with skin. In advance, and without our even being informed, everything is already ordered-classed according to a scale which gives primacy to one element over another. And power to one thing, or to one being over another. All the time. And in an unfounded manner.

Hélène Cixous¹

In his 1968 book *The Empty Space*, director Peter Brook famously declared that one person watching another walk across a bare stage 'is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged'.²

In a 2001 interview with Jérôme Bel, when asked, 'What is a show for you?' the choreographer answered simply: 'It is live people in the dark who watch other living ones in the light.'³

And in their 2007 book, dramaturgs and performance scholars Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt wrote: 'Dramaturgy is ... produced through a dialogue between the play and a particular community of people in a particular time and place.'⁴

Whenever we speak of theatre and performance, we speak of relations between particular humans — 'living ones' — observing or in dialogue with other humans.

So far, the picture is rather clear and familiar.

However, in her 1994 State of the Union address, dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven distinguished between two kinds of dramaturgy, a minor and a major. The first type refers to the theatrical production and its audiences, 'those things that can be grasped on a human scale', while beyond it, in ever-expanding orbits, we find the major dramaturgy: 'around the production lies the theatre and around the theatre lies the city and around the city, as far as we can see, lies the whole world and even the sky and all its stars'. In her address Van Kerkhoven urges that it is now necessary, 'awfully necessary', that we turn our attention to the major dramaturgy.⁵

But what kind of theatre would this be, to engage the whole world 'and even the sky and all its stars'? If followed to the letter, Van Kerkhoven's proposition would entail an exceptional shift in scale; this impossibly 'expanded' dramaturgy would require a radical reconfiguration of theatre itself, as well as the entire conceptual apparatus by which we construct and apprehend acts, human or not. If we were to genuinely include sky and stars as dramaturgical elements (not just as 'props' or painted back-

grounds), then we would have to start writing manifestos for a theatre based on cosmic interrelations, featuring subatomic matter and non-matter, as well as entities, scales, and temporalities that escape human understanding altogether. In short, we would need to declare as woefully obsolete the humanist tradition that still underpins Western theatre and its all-too-human dramaturgies.

As unrealistic as all this may sound, such a radical act of reorientation is in fact already underway. Courtesy of ecological catastrophe and anthropogenic climate change, the Heideggerian idea of humans as sole 'world-makers' is no longer tenable, as we witness just how much of the world is alive, vibrant, and in motion, where it had once been declared dead, inert, or at best an exploitable resource (according to the humanist fairy tale). Cary Wolfe, a theorist in post-human and animal studies, goes one step further by referring to our current epoch as a 'new reality', given that 'the human occupies *a new place in the universe*, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call non-human subjects: non-human beings, animals, and other biotic and abiotic entities, which are typically cast in the background, have now appeared centre stage in our awareness.'⁶ For Wolfe, such a new reality calls for 'an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited'.⁷ Welcome to the Ecological Age, or (conversely) the Anthropocene, a term coined to highlight the extent to which human industry has geologically altered the planet: we are witnessing a sixth extinction, the

certainty of a long and slow demise of our ecosystems, brought about by decades of overexploitation of the planet's resources in the name of progress and human emancipation from 'Nature'.⁸

In the context of a discussion on dramaturgy, the question becomes: given the 'new reality' of the Anthropocene, what do we find when we zoom back to consider theatrical questions and concepts? A first speculative answer could be this: what we find is that the small-scale focus no longer works so well, for the major dramaturgy now inhabits the minor (to use Van Kerkhoven's terms), blurring the boundaries between living/non-living, human/non-human, and dissolving theatre's 'here and now' into an infinity of sites and extended temporalities. Non-human subjects,

both cosmic and earthly, have gatecrashed the party, and they are here to stay. In this unprecedented situation it seems increasingly strange for theatre to follow ordinary coordinates, as though 'the human' weren't in the process of losing its centre-stage position. If there is a twenty-first century avant-garde, it is not human-led.

Let's pause a moment to define a couple of historical terms. It is not a coincidence that the Western theatre (the art form as well as the building) was re-invented in the Italian Renaissance, in other words precisely as a certain idea of 'Man' was being crafted. Leonardo da Vinci famously drew the 'Vitruvian Man', arms and legs stretched to a perfect squared circle, in an ordered cosmography of the microcosm; unsurprisingly da Vinci also sketched the first proscenium arch theatre, effectively outlining the apparatus that has largely defined and housed live performance ever since. This Humanist Renaissance inheritance is arguably the main paradigm for live theatre, whose dramaturgies are structurally anthropocentric. The history of much performance, especially from the historical avant-gardes onwards, could be seen as a series of varied attempts at dethroning, de-centring, and denaturalizing such a construction: whether questioning the primacy of the theatrical text, aiming for a democracy of scenic elements, challenging the virtuous dancing body, or recognizing the complex agency of spectators, performance has variously challenged the Humanist inheritance embodied in da Vinci's drawing. The Anthropocene, however, presents a new paradigm, proposing to erase the figure of man like 'a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (as Michel Foucault famously anticipated),⁹ and alerting us to previously under-recognized non-human species, scales, and temporalities. The question, therefore, is whether we can now imagine a non-anthropocentric theatre – and if this sounds like a contradiction in terms, then it is precisely a matter of refiguring the terms themselves.

Somewhat irresolutely and indirectly, courting neither hope nor despair, this text is spurred by a set of open-ended questions: if we turn our attention away from the Human, and towards a major dramaturgy of sky and stars, air and water, quarks and neutrinos, metal and carbon and plants and insects, do we then need to abandon theatre altogether? If so, may such an act of abandonment be thought of as artistically continuative (as a challenge to/within the theatre)? And how may we locate practical-conceptual ways of engaging a dramaturgy of sky and stars

from *within* the apparatus, reorienting performance in order to challenge the dogma that dictates that humans should occupy the leading role?¹⁰

In place of tackling these questions head on, in the following pages I take an indirect route, by focusing on works from different disciplines: a 1970s video work, a recent book of photographs of dilapidated auditoria, a 1960s music composition, a visual artist's work, and a live performance. All except one, these are deliberately not what we might call 'theatre' or live arts, and the hope is that it is precisely by looking elsewhere, towards other durations and forms of making present, that we may then return to and reflect back on the limits and potentials of theatre's dramaturgy. Since 'the "copresence" of living beings within the "here and now" of space and time remains *the* truism of theatre', looking to other art forms helps to defamiliarize such a seemingly familiar theatrical apparatus.¹¹

1. The Rock

In his book *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, video artist Bill Viola describes a simple work in which, by his own account, he was able to show the movements of an unmoving rock. All that was required was the substitution of the background for the foreground, and the use of slow motion. In the video we see a large rock, and some people walking past in the background. At one point the video slows down, as is made obvious by the slow-motion walk of the human bodies. But since the main subject of the video is the rock, and people are only shown up to their waist, we understand what Viola's proposition is: that we are now watching the rock slowing down. Unseen yet clearly foregrounded, here are the slow unfolding movements of inanimate stone, occurring no differently than the slow unfolding movements of familiar bipedal animals, only imperceptibly and over a more extensive duration.

It is a question of shifting between different scales, not unlike certain passages in *Alice in Wonderland*. Viola is first of all asking us to consider that the familiar human scale is always only one possibility among countless non-human others and, second, inviting us to tune in to the slower speed of the rock: to become rock-like in our perception and thoughts. This is not something that can be easily practised or grasped in our everyday lives, at least not firmly enough to produce a genuine shift in perspective, yet through the video work, as described by Viola, it becomes

possible to engage with geological scale and duration, perceptually, imaginatively, critically if we wish. There are always other kinds of spatio-temporal worlds and phenomena alongside those we consciously notice and acknowledge; there is always a geocentrism alongside our anthropocentrism, and with that the potential to practice swapping the background for the foreground. As in the elegant conundrum posed by nature writer Annie Dillard: 'What if *I* fell in a forest: would a tree hear?'¹²

Through this kind of reversal, Viola is rehearsing what we may call a dramaturgy of the background: a form of reorientation where stone and rock, typically considered inert and lacking any degree of animation, are shown to move in the same circles usually reserved for plants and animals. French poet Francis Ponge remarks how stone, due to it not procreating like other beings, cannot be made into a symbol of longevity and passivity, for 'it is truly the only thing in nature which is constantly dying'.¹³ Whereas 'plant life, animals, gases and liquids revolve quite rapidly in their cycles of dying and returning to life', pebbles and stones are bound to a slow and 'continual disintegration'.¹⁴

Through the example of Bill Viola's video let's turn to consider a typical theatre auditorium. Seemingly as dead and inert 'as a stone', a traditional theatre also moves and unfolds slowly, regardless of whether humans are present or not: the stage floor has its own motion and speed, the walls have their own motion and speed, as do the curtains, the seats, the balconies, and so on. To this we may then add the activity of air, moisture, dust, insect life, plant life, and animal life, both human and not.

In her book *Stages of Decay*, photographer Julia Solis offers captivating images of abandoned theatres across the US and Germany, temporally dislocated predictions of what lies in wait for the climate change generation. By the artist's own admission, the photographs are 'meant as a celebration of these ruins, as the theatres are slowly turning into the playgrounds of their own demise'.¹⁵ The book is, truly, an uncritical and romantic celebration of decay, and could be dismissed as yet another example of 'ruin porn', given the way these lavish images of architectural destruction are disconnected from their political and social contexts. Despite these reservations, Solis' work draws attention to the animations of the inanimate, for example in her striking description of the process of dissolution of a typical auditorium:

With their abandonment, a whole new drama begins to unfold. It starts slowly at first, with a few open windows letting in the wind and rain, the snow and the spores for the first patches of moss to take hold ... the top layer of paint begins to crack, often in a sharp, continuous stroke that sounds like a clawed animal scurrying across the wall. Plaster ornaments dissolve right on the wiring until they can no longer support themselves... Horsehair, once used to hold together plaster decorations, begins to stick out between structural elements like strange, insect-like antennae... The seats burst ... The stage curtain drops as its fireproof backing splits and bubbles into the mouldy fabric, combining with the deteriorating floor of the stage into a fantastical fungal landscape.¹⁶

Such a spectacle of dissolution remains unperceived when we go 'to the theatre'. The material capacities of the building and décor are typically concealed or arrested by the demands of functionality and social usage: in order for the building to remain 'open', it needs to be 'maintained', which means, essentially, that its physical properties need to be tightly policed to conform to certain values and modes of inhabitation. Auditoria around the world are treated as expressions of humanist grandeur or civic pride, never as lively and chaotic assemblies of entropic processes.

Solis' photographs of abandoned theatres are powerful reminders of how non-human subjects act and interact, for example as slow-forming fungal events, or as the dynamic weathering of artefacts. Here, as elsewhere, entities that we typically refer to as the background come to the fore and compose particular eventful alliances. Wouldn't the next step be to see how human *and* non-human agents may assemble, co-choreograph, and flourish in such a space?

2. The Butterfly

Some years ago now I read about a musical composition by La Monte Young. The piece begins when a butterfly (in my memory, always a yellow one) is released into the auditorium; it finishes when the winged insect, having flown around the space for an indeterminate length of time, finally exits through an open window.¹⁷

The butterfly is the protagonist, and the invitation – for one minute, one hour, one evening, or longer – is to attend to

its presence in the auditorium: its aerial trajectories, its pauses, and its possible or eventual exit. More importantly, since this is a piece of music, Young's composition is asking us to carry out an impossible task, which is to *listen* to the butterfly. As its wings beat the air, the auditorium is filled with vibrations and sounds, no differently from those at a traditional concert; yet unlike a trombone's or a flute's, these vibrations are too subtle to be picked up by humans. Unless the winged insect should happen to fly a couple of centimetres past one's ears, the audience cannot properly perform its role: if we cannot hear, we cannot be an audience (etymologically, from *audire*, to hear).

We may wish to quickly label the piece (and somewhat close off its potential) as 'conceptual': its motor is the ideation itself, while the sonorous and sensuous aspects are inaccessible or irrelevant. If we try to resist this labelling, however, we may notice that something else is at stake here. Perhaps unwittingly the piece is staging a paradox and a challenge for our times: how to be present to an event that does not address us. What La Monte Young's composition places centre stage is not just an insect but, crucially, the question of how to engage with it, if at all possible: how can we attend to events and phenomena that lay beyond the senses, such as insects' *insensible* sonorities? Can we form relations predicated upon a kind of non-relationality? As audience members who can no longer play the role of those who listen to sounds, we must radically reorient ourselves, readjusting our expectations and desires, and give up a little of our sovereignty: in an auditorium that is host to indiscernible non-human phenomena (that is to say, each and every auditorium), we can no longer rehearse our ideal of 'presence' in the here and now. Young's work is a reminder of that complex unfolding of sonorous energy that is, simply put, not 'for us', yet forms a great part of shared sonic environments. Casting a line across the ordinary human limits of perception and audibility, the composition asks us to dwell in that limit zone where nothing is happening, yet so much always is.

We may speculate what kind of dramaturgical model this piece offers, in which the main act is neither 'expressive' (of human intention, will, mastery, and so forth) nor does it become matter for perception – a situation no longer defined by the opposite poles of production and reception, and in which the roles of artist and spectator are suspended ... but in favour of what exactly?

I have never attended a presentation of Young's piece, but I am often reminded of it when, sitting in a theatre watching a performance, I catch sight of a moth or a fly on the lit stage, usually circling above the performer's heads.¹⁸ Generally speaking these insect appearances are either entirely ignored or at most treated as negligible interruptions, far too irrelevant to upstage the human performers. Unlike dogs or donkeys, whose stage appearance may engender cross-species empathy and reflections on the role of animals in theatre, insects are too 'lowly' for us to project human dramas on to: their bodies are too small and frail, their appearance too alien, their lives too unimportant (I have never killed a rodent or a bird, but plenty of ants, mosquitoes, and flies). We tend to regard insects as pieces of moving dirt, and it is fitting that for centuries it was thought that flies generated spontaneously from dirt and dust.¹⁹ Yet we are vastly outnumbered by smaller life forms, as Annie Dillard reminds us: 'The average size of all living animals, including man, is almost that of a housefly.'²⁰ Our scales are dramatically in need of recalibration.

Whenever I see a fly buzz around the stage during a dance performance, I think to myself, perhaps naïvely and hippy-ishly: how can that insect be given the same level of attention as the dancer? More critically, I am reminded of how the theatrical apparatus configures modes of attention and attendance that exclude 'less-than-human' lives, and how each time we buy an admission ticket and take our seats, that exclusion is reaffirmed and naturalized.

On reflection, La Monte Young's piece, as reframed by current ecological concerns, seeks not so much to give the butterfly the 'same' level of attention as human-produced music, but rather to intervene in the very apparatus of the auditorium itself, skewing our anthropocentric listening habits, in order to make room for other scales of sense and sensibility. The piece's dramaturgical direction may read: the interruption is here to stay.

3. The Moon and the Theatre

Artist Katie Paterson has been liaising with cosmic entities for some time, producing a kind of neo-romantic-conceptual body of work that features dead stars, black holes, and meteorites, as well as earthlier performing matter, such as melting glaciers, lightning storms, and specks of desert sand.

One of Paterson's recurring strategies consists of playfully aligning human and planetary activities, often through iconic works of music. Her piece *As the World Turns* features a turntable rotating in time with Earth, 'one revolution every 24 hours, playing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*'.²¹ Lasting four years if played in total, the record's movements are too slow to be perceived by the naked eye. Paterson is taking a human artefact, Vivaldi's record, and slowing it down to match the speed of our host planet's revolutions: the composition's avowed content (the passage of the seasons) is thus subjected to an operation that silences or backgrounds the music, foregrounding the planetary motion that Vivaldi was originally referring to; something is no doubt lost, but much is gained. As in Viola's invisible rock movements, and Young's inaudible composition, here the human senses are denied traditional cultural consumption, in favour of what Jane Bennett describes as 'an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality'.²²

Earth's moon has featured in a number of Paterson's works, most notably through a form of radio transmission called E.M.E. (Earth-Moon-Earth). This allows for sound to travel from our planet outwards for approximately 800,000 miles, after which it is reflected off the moon's surface and returned to Earth two and a half seconds later; the sound effectively bounces from one 'body' to another. Paterson first made use of E.M.E. transmission by sending four minutes and thirty-three seconds of recorded silence to the moon and back, thus reframing Cage's *4'33"* as an interplanetary activity. In a later piece, the artist transmitted Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, and because the moon's surface only reflected part of the content (some is always lost in the moon's shadows), what returned to Earth was a slightly broken up version of Beethoven's composition. Visitors to the gallery could hear this 'moon-altered' edition performed live on a self-playing grand piano.²³

As though taking dramaturg Van Kerkhoven's proposition to the letter (although admittedly not dealing with 'theatre'), Paterson's E.M.E. works connect the minor to the major dramaturgy, tracing orbits of interconnection in a yearned for affinity between cosmic and human acts. Paterson's moon works replay the Romantic unfathomable, this time casting the artwork as merely a privileged moment – for example, the visit to the gallery – within ungraspable processes involving prodigious bodies, distances, and timescales.

How may theatre similarly shift out of its orbit, given its inbuilt reliance on the here and now, the visible and graspable, in other words the minor dramaturgy we started out with? How may the theatre apparatus – that aesthetic, perceptual, and architectural construct that we're always inside of when in proximity to performance – engender antidotes to its own humanism, and enact a radical reorientation towards non-human subjects? If this seems too much to ask of theatre and performance (this remains an open question), we may speak of this shift as though it were already underway. For instance, on the day before the Brussels workshop 'Unfolding Dramaturgies' organized by the book's editors, we attend a performance of *Prelude* by Ula Sickle, Yann Lequay, and Stine Janvin Motland, presented in the Kaaitheater's main space.²⁴ In a memorable sequence, the lone performer (vocalist Stine Janvin Motland) sits at the edge of the bare stage telling the audience a captivating story, and then suddenly presses a button to release a large cloud of white smoke. The performer continues her narration as though nothing happened, while the wisps of white cloud slowly take over the large cavernous space of the Kaai, swirling and expanding upwards in an intricate 'dance', visually overwhelming the increasingly smaller human body. The performer telling her engaging story, the cloud unfurling upwards ... both things happening, differently yet equally, matter for perception, and myself struggling with where and how to place my attention. I turn my head repeatedly away from the performer's narration and towards the cloud, and then back to the performer, unable to decide, to settle on either one: which rhythm to follow? Which event to give my attention to? Although not quite travelling to the moon and back, in this example the theatre is reconfigured as a place in which to witness different scales, 'lives', and modes of existence; it is an opportunity to get caught in the undecidable rift between semantics and material, flesh and cloud, the here and the elsewhere.

We might describe this, once again, as another example of a dramaturgy of the background: what is being tested out, within the deeply anthropocentric theatrical apparatus, is precisely an alternative to such human-centredness. And why is such an alternative necessary? Because, courtesy of ecological catastrophe and anthropogenic climate change, an irrevocable shift in perspective has suddenly imposed itself: the outside has burst inside the auditorium; or rather, we are only now realizing that *the*

outside has always been inside. As political theorist Jane Bennett notes: 'There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.'²⁵

The good news is that, despite our best efforts at concealment, the theatre has always been a place and a time for the mingling of human and non-human events. More than that privileged moment in which humans observe and dialogue exclusively with other humans, today we can acknowledge that performance is a manifestation of ecological relations, an opportunity for attending to the ever-present 'interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity'. The invitation here is to remodel our understanding of events and phenomena, in line with Steven Shaviro's radical suggestion that in 'the vast interconnections of the universe, everything both perceives and is perceived'.²⁶

In practical terms, I am not referring to environmental shows about global warming, presented in theatres that run on solar power, nor am I referring to works that feature animals and objects, if this means simply making a little room for them on the human stage, for the duration of an evening. It is rather about recognizing the transformation of the very category of the human, and how this transformation needs to be practised in the domain of performance, yielding dramaturgies as yet undreamt.

For too long performance has been caught up in tropes like presence, liveness, and ephemerality, in other words the here-and-now trap, which necessarily ignores non-human subjects. What forms may performance take when we recognize that it is *always* enmeshed in non-human spatial and temporal scales and durations? Why not loosen, or even risk losing, the human two-way traffic of theatre, to see what kinds of impossible dramaturgies may emerge?

It is not a question of 'staging' or 'representing' the Anthropocene, but rather of understanding, experimentally and provisionally, how this epoch and its emergent paradigms are changing representation for good, just like the outburst of a river bends and reconfigures a bridge, a dam, or a street. The challenge and the call to performance is to outplay its anthropocentric bias, again and again, and to reorient towards ecological relations (and non-relations), at the risk of having to abandon concepts and practices we hold dear.

Notes

- 1 Cixous, *Rootprints*, p. 11.
- 2 Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 7.
- 3 Bel, 'Interview with Fabienne Arvers', www.82.238.77.78/jeromebel/eng/jeromebel.asp?m=4&t=1.
- 4 Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, p. 36.
- 5 Van Kerkhoven, 'State of the Union Address', www.kaaitheater.be/marianne.
- 6 Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, p. 47, italics given are mine.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 8 Florêncio, 'Enmeshed Bodies, Impossible Touch', p. 53.
- 9 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 422.
- 10 This sentence is taken from a question posed by film director Michelangelo Frammartino, whose work *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) strongly inspired the thoughts in this text. Frammartino's question reads: 'Can cinema free itself of the dogma which dictates that human beings should occupy the leading role?' See Frammartino, *Le Quattro Volte Press Book*, www.kinolorber.com/data/presskit/lqv_pressbook.pdf. Fischer-Lichte in Schneider, 'New Materialism and Performance Studies', p. 9.
- 11 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, p. 93.
- 12 Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 64.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 14 Solis, in Pow, 'Final Curtain', www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2314483.
- 15 Solis, *Stages of Decay*, p. 19.
- 16 The piece in question is La Monte Young's *Composition # 5 1960*, which I first read about in 2006. In fact, the score is slightly less precise than my memory of it: any number of butterflies may be released in the space, and their potential window exit is to be staged only if an unlimited amount of time is available. See Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 50.
- 17 Regarding small animals in theatres, I have dedicated a lecture-work and essay on the appearance of a swallow inside Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico. See Corrieri, *In Place of a Show*. Also Nicholas Ridout's 'The Animal on Stage' begins with an account of a mouse scuttling across the floor during a West End production: 'so small, so accidental', the mouse may 'prove too fragile a frame on which to build a theory of theatrical labour'. See Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, p. 101.
- 18 See Connor, 'Making Flies Mean Something', p. 9.
- 19 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, p. 129.
- 20 Paterson, 'As The World Turns', www.katiepaterson.org/worldturns.
- 21 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.
- 22 An extract can be listened to on Paterson's website. See Paterson, 'Earth-Moon-Earth', www.katiepaterson.org/eme.
- 23 Advertising information on 'Prelude' can be found at Van Kerkhoven, www.kaaitheater.be/en/e1468/prelude.
- 24 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 31.
- 25 Shaviro, 'Deleuze's Encounter with Whitehead', p. 9.

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