

Abstract

For political philosopher Hannah Arendt, action is also that which inserts us into the world, makes possible our public appearance and our political participation. In performance, action is that which invites us in, marks or blurs the boundaries between public and private, theatrical gesture and its spectating. In writing about performance, I am confronted with action two-fold. In the instance in which I encounter it in the live moment, raw and incomplete; and in the textual gesture I extend in return.

In this paper, I consider the relationship between critical writing about performance and training practice, through an exploration of action. I draw on Arendt's philosophy to examine the ways in which action operates in pedagogical approaches to critical writing. I do so by considering the plural modes of action and representation as found in a Jackson Pollock painting inspired by William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

In this manner, I stage a gentle confrontation between the process of critical writing, marked by encounter, resistance, articulation, interpretation and dialogue, my own experience of training critical writers, and the politics of description that shape the critical text. I consider how this confrontation might offer configurations of encounters with performance, allowing for change and specificity in the training process.

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Unpeeling action: critical writing, training and process

I had the urgent sense that writing has to unpeel all constructions of action and perception in the instant of their occurrences in order for one to "be" at all'
Leslie Scalapino (2003 p.19)

Leslie Scalapino speaks of writing as a way through which action is unpeeled; and within her proposition of writing as containing a moment of plural action, I find a powerful parallel with the relationship between criticism, pedagogy and performance. Scalapino speaks of writing as a space in which action can be made to appear. The poetics of writing enable action to both occur in the instance in which it is written, and, as a result, appear over time, she proposes. And this mode of thinking about the presence of action within writing, through poetics and language rather than the body, provides a useful prism through which to consider the relationships between critical writing, performance and pedagogy.

I propose to consider here the ways in which criticism is a mode of writing that captures performance, marking a site of its staging and appropriation. I think of this as a restaging of action from the realm of performance to that of writing, a process of appearance enabled through the act of description. And furthermore, to consider training as a site in which this concurrence of writerly and performance action might be staged, examined and unpacked. In writing about performance, I grapple with action, both in its physical occurrence in the space of the performance, and in its gestural, metaphorical or symbolic connotations when it emerges in the critical text. (And it is occurring through this very text,

reader, in-between the paragraphs, embedded in my language; it is how I appear to you here)

In this paper, I reflect on the role of action in critical writing about performance and training as a way to access the processes that it might render present; action, drawing on the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt, is that which inserts us into the world, makes possible our participation, but also suggests our thinking processes. Action marks our entry into political life in the public realm, but it also marks the participation of writing into the world of the performance it seeks to critique or recollect. Training can allow a space to access this encounter – an unfolding of thought into performance as it occurs in critical writing.

I focus here on critical writing in its textual form, as a site in which the presence of the writer is felt and disclosed, and description, as the occurrence of this disclosure. I consider how in training critical writing, processes in which action is captured and ignited, encountered and fragmented are exposed.

I begin with a few orientations on the training of critical writing as practice, and continue with an analogy examining action's representational and aesthetic manifestations, leading to a tracing of the fundamental characteristics of process in critical writing. I conclude by considering the relationship between action and description in the critical text as fundamentals of an architecture of appearance in the training of critical writing. Throughout this piece, I suggest that action is what marks processes of appearance in criticism, training and performance; it is

that which marks performance's occurrence, is re-made and re-encountered in the critical text, and enables an unpacking of thinking processes in training.

Orientations: critical writing and training

When I speak of critical writing, I refer to a set of practices that concern themselves with reflecting critically on and about performance. In the UK, criticism has most often been associated with the practice of reviewing, and, alongside this, situated within mainstream media. Recent infrastructural changes, made evident through the diversification of these spaces of criticism into the realm of the discursive, collaborative, DIY publishing and the online realm (Butt 2004, Lijster et al 2015), have resulted in looser boundaries between different conceptualisations and iterations of criticism.

Although there remain institutional, individual and infrastructural tensions between different modes and practices of criticism, particularly in relation to reviewing, I deliberately concentrate here on critical writing as an umbrella term for a variety of practices that engage in response to and analysis of performance through a plurality of forms, and away from the legislative nature of more traditional forms of reviewing. In this manner, I also refer to training as something that is both performed by the individual writer, as well as developed through professional or academic contexts.

As critic Andrew Haydon proposes in an article for the German publication *Nachtkritik*, recent debates surrounding theatre criticism in the UK have been shaped by a rift between bloggers - or those operating outside of mainstream

media - and increasingly precariously employed critics, who remain sceptical of the rigour and scope of such writing (2014). Haydon's article captures a particularly crisis-driven moment in public discourse on performance criticism in the UK, suggestive of a de-professionalisation of the role of the theatre critic. More widely, the debates surrounding the professionalism of bloggers and the precarity of newspaper critics are also articulated by professional bodies such as the International Association of Critics, which dedicated its 27th congress to the subject of criticism and the impact of the internet.

I want to suggest that this has to do with the history of training of critical writers in theatre and performance. Historically, training critics was confined either to academic contexts, grounded in literary theory and studies in English departments, or vocational ones, where writers gained understanding of the mechanisms and poetics of theatre and performance on the job. This vocational legacy is reflected in the myriad of practice-oriented publications on theatre criticism in the UK, which have come from men who have held steady positions at newspapers and publications. Amongst these, I name the *Guardian's* Michael Billington with *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (2001), Irving Wardle (who has been employed by *The Observer* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, among others) with *Theatre Criticism* (1992) and, recently, the *Guardian* and *Variety's* Mark Fisher with *How to Write About Theatre* (2015). These publications orient the history and practice of theatre criticism within the boundaries of journalism and literary studies,¹ but they also provide delineations

¹ The origins of such positioning can be found in historical accounts of dramatic criticism, by Charles W Meister in 1917 and S R Littlewood in 1939. Both publications cast their net more

between criticism and reviewing from a particular institutional perspective that is less and less common for practising critics, and excludes multiple iterations of criticism in the public sphere.

Of course, this landscape has changed significantly with the rise of Theatre and Performance Studies in British universities, as well as an infrastructural development in the professional landscape of criticism in the UK. Notable publications that explicitly tackle the effects that postmodernism has had on conceptualisations and practices of criticism, such as Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) Henry Sayre's *The Object of Performance: American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (1992), Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson's *Performing the Body, Performing the Text* (1999), Gavin Butt's *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (2005) or, more widely, Jane Rendell's *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (2010), evidence a re-orientation of training from criticism as a practice of cultural legislation to one of interpretation. Whilst embedded within disciplinary formal developments, these publications favour a multiplicity of approaches to criticism, problematise the inherent authority of the critic as cultural legislator and invite a reconsideration of the relationship that criticism has to performance and cultural discourse under capitalism.

In the UK, the landscape of critical writing on and about performance draws, in equal measure, from more traditional forms of criticism found in newspapers or

widely to consider other writing on dramatic arts from within the literary canon, yet remain concentrated on reviewing as a fundamental contemporary manifestation of criticism.

online, as well as art writing, poetic practice or critical spatial practice.

Performative writing, for example, has an equal interest in the mechanisms of writing and in challenging the relationship between event and viewer. Caroline Bergvall speaks about the fine boundaries between performance and writing in her keynote speech for the Symposium on Performance Writing at Dartington College by asking 'is performance writing not writing? [...] But then does writing not perform? And when does writing not perform?' (1996 p.1). Della Pollock extends a similar invitation to consider the interconnectedness of writing and performance by examining their multiple relationships (1998), and Adrian Heathfield argues for a close connection between writing and the event of performance in *Writing the Event* (2006). Such modalities of writing about art foreground the subjectivity of the encounter, and draw on methodologies of fine art criticism. They are instrumental, I propose, in establishing the groundwork for a different mode of engagement with performance, whilst remaining somewhat removed from the historical lineage of traditional theatre criticism, sometimes following the explicit desire for separation from any evaluative or legislative aims.

By 2010, the landscape of British theatre criticism was occupied by a range of artists and writers regularly engaged with criticism, as well as digital publications. Open Dialogues, founded by Mary Paterson and Rachel Lois Clapham in 2008, drew an explicit link between performance writing and the subjective act of spectating. Open Dialogues developed interdisciplinary, collaborative, project-based work, between performance and criticism. I was part of the collective that founded *Exeunt Magazine*, an online publication

seeking to develop new models for critical writing, which became a regular participant in the growing online critical culture. We work on collaborative features, which invite different writers to co-edit a text about a performance, as well as exploring the meeting point between the digital and the critical. In 2012 critics Maddy Costa and Jake Orr founded *Dialogue*, a project that seeks to 'shift the conversation that happens around, about and through theatre'. At the same time, numerous symposia and conferences took place focusing on the changing landscape of criticism, most notably at Brock University in Canada. 'The Changing Face of Theatre Criticism' (2014) brought together scholars and working critics to consider the shifting relationships between theatre and critics.

These public exchanges served to widen the conversation about what constitutes criticism, welcoming collaboration and embedded practices, from writers sitting in rehearsals or following the work of a theatre company for an extended period of time, to the realm of criticism outside the academy, echoing some of the developments articulated earlier in academic scholarship.

The effect of these changes has been a looser boundary between the academy and the public arena, with distinctions less clearly demarcated. If, for example, performative writing crosses the territory of the theoretical and the practical, criticism in its more traditional manifestations and scholarly study remains somewhat fragmented between these two contexts. What separates these fields is an attitude towards criticality itself: performative writing seeks to delineate an autonomous territory of operation, whilst, at the other end, reviewing is increasingly defined in relation to output and specificity of form. I speak here of a

practice of criticism that can account for these multiple shifts, maintaining an interest in different forms of relationship between performance and criticism, whilst not committing to the efficacy of one or other; protecting the different scopes, competing or otherwise.

Training has also been affected by these changes, in that it is no longer confined to universities or vocational settings, but also activated by festivals with writing programmes, residencies, artist-critic collaborations and research-oriented projects. My own experience of training navigates these professional and academic contexts, from working with training pedagogically within higher education, to leading more collaborative, embedded training programmes, for both younger critics and international colleagues.

My interest in training stems from the experience of encountering registers of criticism that do not allow, within their architecture, for a sufficient consideration of the different variables at play in the process of writing criticism. If training can occur in such contexts where criticism and performance interact intimately, then it is in this interaction where action is identified as fuelling a different pedagogical relationship to critical writing.

It is important at this point to note the specificity of critical writing about performance, as opposed to criticism more broadly. Although historically rooted in the textual, critical writing on performance always concerns itself with an event, rather than an object of focus. The referent for critical writing is multiple, because that referent is performance in itself. This eventness means that no

performance can ever be grasped in full, as the critic navigates meaning-making processes in their complexity.² In this manner, focusing on critical writing about performance and its training is not solely a matter reserved for academics or specialists, but one which is significant for makers and audiences alike; how we grapple with meaning, and how this appears in our critical engagements, not only provides a significant site of contention and debate, but is also a politically charged territory.

Philosophies of action: Hannah Arendt and critical practice

Hannah Arendt is a crucial source of thinking on criticism, because she does not deny, nor dramatise the roles affect and participation play in the realm of appearance. Neither does she, I propose, dissolve the poetics of the thinking activity from the moral problems that judgment and will introduce. Action and thought are tied together in her philosophy, in the same manner in which they are constitutive of a process of critical practice. If action is one of the fundamentals of performance, it is also that which emerges in any form of critical engagement, be it through descriptive or critical analysis. In the same manner in which performance thinks through action, so does, I propose, critical writing. I

² Erika Fischer-Lichte writes at length about this in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, arguing that 'at no point is it possible for spectators to regard a performance in its entirety [...] and to relate the individual theatrical elements they are perceiving as a whole.' (2008, p.155). Fischer-Lichte foregrounds the ways in which meaning-making in performance occurs through a shift between the orders of representation and presence. Her analysis foregrounds the ways in which the critic becomes an embodied presence in the performance, marking the ways in which she both recalls and interprets that performance from a multiplicity of positions.

am dealing with action as a form of poetics of critical writing, through which movement, referent (the performance itself) and language interact.

Fundamental to Arendt's philosophy of appearance is the position that 'nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not predispose a spectator' (1971 p.19). This signals the extent to which Arendt's philosophy of appearance is contingent on a theatrical paradigm, by which the realm of appearance is constituted through spectated actions. I point towards the ways in which the politics that fuel the structured nature of the theatrical encounter are central to Arendt's philosophy.

In addition, for Arendt, mental activities, which are by default non-appearing, 'occur in a world of appearances and in a being that partakes of these appearances through its receptive sense organs as well as through its own ability and urge to appear to others' (1971 p.75). Thinking can only 'come into being [...] through a deliberate *withdrawal* from appearances' (1971 p.76). The processes of visibility and withdrawal mark the articulation of thought in the same way in which they frame the critical process. The critic withdraws from her encounter with the work in order to return to it – she is both embodied in the moment of spectating, and occasionally removed by her reflections.

Arendt invites us to engage with critical process as that which is shaped by our encounter with work, but made palpable by, and extended through, the activities of thought and interpretation. It is within this process that the writer grapples with the memory of the event she has encountered, orients herself towards a

critical reflection, and confronts her own subjectivity. In this manner, the writer is both withdrawn and present, whilst inserting herself into the realm of appearance through her critical output – the text itself. The writer holds a dynamic position in the critical process, posited between the encounter and the text: navigating between presence and absence, caught in different temporalities. She is also implicitly engaged in a process of recalling what I term the referent - the performance which acts as the starting point for critical reflection.

It is my proposition that in trying to access this process of thinking and interpretation, training, both led and self-reflective, provides a context through which relationships between criticality and subjectivity, criticism and performance can be re-thought. This is achieved through a slowing down, an accessing of process through activities that give equal ground to description, analysis, memory and recall, in order to better shape a critical text and its politics. In this way, the training I speak of here is pedagogical, but not overtly didactic. It seeks to foreground a varied practice of criticism that makes art appear, whilst also accessing other discourses that might set its politics in motion. This is less a practice of cultural valuation of legislation, and more one that favours a visibility of process and interpretive frameworks. It is, I propose, only through confronting these that the ideologies that shape our own thinking about performance might be further understood.

In my work as a critic, I encounter a wide range of writers seeking to confront their own relationships to subjectivity and criticality. My starting point is always action, as that which is generative of performance but also of thought, as much as

it is iterative of process. Thinking about action allows me to consider the relationships that might be at play between critical writing and performance; these relationships are framed by a process that begins when the writer encounters the work, during the live moment, and that unfolds over time in a series of interpretive, thinking processes which result in the text itself.

Orienting training: between trace and action

Figure 1

Jackson Pollock: *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. Oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches. © 2013 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

One of the first drip paintings made by the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, its surface thick with encrusted objects and splattered paint, contains a complex problem that is, I propose, at the heart of my engagement with critical writing, training and its relationship to action. This problem is one of relationships: between the referent of the painting, its depiction and interpretation, and my own relationship as viewer of these two processes of meaning that refuse to be resolved. By investigating the ways in which these relationships emerge through and on the canvas, I suggest a parallel between the painting's poetic, critical engagement with its source material, and criticism's processes of interpretation made manifest through action, and in relationship to performance-as-referent.

Pollock is one of the pioneers of action painting (Beyeler 2008 p.20); his work fights pictorial representation. As art critic Harold Rosenberg has claimed, Pollock was part of a generation of artists who were interested in the canvas 'as an arena in which to act, rather than a space in which to [...] express an object.' (1962 p.25). Rosenberg proposes that this space of action is no longer a picture, but an event in and of itself. Contained, therefore, in Pollock's painting, are first and foremost the traces of its coming into being, layered thick onto each other, appropriating accident through fragments (nails, buttons, keys, coins).

I might find the same in a critical text: a surface onto which interpretation, description and thought emerge. So I move from the representational through the textual, whilst acknowledging that every critical text holds a poetics as much as an aesthetics of its own coming into being. Pollock's painting demonstrates this: it both represents action in the making of the painting, and gestures towards its referent through its visual landscape. By understanding the ways in which Pollock's performance is manifest in the space of his painting, I make explicit the ways in which action and description can be foregrounded as fundamental modes of training.

The most striking aspect of this painting is its strength of movement, its suggestion of colour, and its depiction of action. The splashes of paint onto the canvas are remnants of physical movement: they tell the story of its coming into being, and by doing so, describe this process through movement – paint is, in Pollock's work, movement itself. By ascribing this movement to a source text, Pollock performs a critical action – a deliberate mistranslation, a creative

interpretation of Shakespeare's work. The painting itself proposes an action that might resist an explicit deconstruction of that which it represents, as acknowledged through the referent of the title. So what is action doing in this depiction?

The title of Pollock's painting is a direct reference to a particular event depicted in Ariel's song in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which describes a death by shipwreck :

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Burthen.
Ding-Dong. (I.ii.14)

In Ariel's song, the destructive nature of death is reconstituted by the generative processes of nature. The drowning man's body is engulfed by the sea, his bones turned to coral, his eyes now pearls.

Pollock's title makes a direct reference to Ariel's song, but it does not represent it. In fact, within the context of the painting as a whole, the title is that which enables the action of interpretation, because it creates a dissonance, an irresolvable struggle, a resistance, that is also the key to the painting's appearance. The Title *Full Fathom Five* attributes a referent to the painting-Shakespeare's text, which invites the viewer to seek that event which the text

depicts within the painting itself- to attribute its hues to the tempest at sea, look for the brightness of pearls or the texture of coral bones. And, while I might be able to attribute some of these elements to the painting itself, at the same time, the work defies its referent. The painting is neither straightforward appropriation, nor can it fully realise itself without the referent. Even if I have no knowledge of the poem, the presence of the referent is not necessarily destroyed; rather a different aspect of its presence becomes free. The generative processes of meaning in Shakespeare's text are neither nullified nor represented; they are distorted, interpreted, and made to appear in the actions of the painting itself.

This struggle happens when I try to apply the text to the painting. The title is both key to its meaning, and displaces it too, producing a gap that can only be appropriated by my own subjectivity. The referent, therefore, is present in the painting, contained within its eventness as such, but not represented. Pollock's painting is evocative and narrative at the same time. In its non-pictorial action, Pollock's painting re-considers an event - the traces and fragments of its material, splashed and dripped across the thickening crust of the canvas. There are, therefore processes of both destruction and construction inherent within the event that the painting both is and depicts: those of the referent. The destruction occurs when the referent lacks distinctive presence outside of the powers of suggestion; the construction occurs when that very presence renders the painting its particular identity.

The struggle that Pollock's painting creates with its referent means that action becomes gestural, rather than mimetic. There is no enactment of the referent

taking place, but a visible process of interpretation; and whilst there is a relationship between the referent and the painting, the two also hold a degree of independence. Action becomes the trigger for an interpretive event with distinct poetics, rather than solely a mode of accessing the referent. In the same manner, critical writing might position itself in relationship to performance-as-referent, but also gain independence from it, operating within its own architectures of meaning, through action. The referent is always present, but the emergence of interpretation, subjectivity and positioning become the mode through which critical writing is tied to action.

Criticism is, I propose, staged through this action, in which the referent, to draw on Arendt, makes an appearance, but is also gesturally and poetically re-orientated. This allows for a process-oriented understanding of a critical text, which hides the event of its own making within its fabric.

Pollock's painting offers an aesthetic experience of interpretation, but its literal use of trace and action mark it as an appropriate anchor for this discussion.

Leaping from the realms of representation to those of appearance of meaning enables me to foreground the role action plays in signalling, and opening up, the discursive and interpretive processes contained by the critical text. I have proposed that these not only manifest themselves through action, but also through the aesthetics of writing.

How might critical writing be seen to contain the processes of its own formation, and what might the relationship be between these processes and pedagogy? If I

work from the position that critical writing holds an inherent relationship to performance-as-referent, then what might I find in the process of recall that occurs as a result?

The ontology of the critical text is always in transformation, always in an irresolvable struggle and dissonance with the referent, containing the processes of its very existence. In a problematic relationship with meaning as it travels from the referent, the slippery nature of the material trace of criticism – the text itself – balances its identity as document of the referent. Yet at the same time it contends with the forces inherent in subjectivity. The critical text is both an engagement with the referent and the event it depicts, and a performance of its own meaning-making processes. Fundamentally it can only exist because of its referent, yet at the same time it lays considerable claims to the construction of its own meaning.

Criticism performs on many levels, but it is its materiality that uncovers the dynamic operations of visibility at its core. It is this aspect that also enables training to be developed. Here, the critical text not only offers the material for its own formation, but also the architecture onto which training can be built, through the ways in which it invites a reconsideration of that very process. This understanding of materiality also has implications for the identity of the critical text, which moves beyond the singular; no longer can I speak of the critical text as pertaining solely to the realm of the documentary. What emerges in this engagement with processes of appearance is the critical text's multiple functions, as a witness, unreliable archivist and documenter, interpreter and historian.

Critical process and encounters with action

In the same manner in which Pollock's painting occupies a multiplicity of positions in relation to *The Tempest*, so might I conceive of the critical writer as not solely taking one stance in her encounter with the work; in fact, the eventness of contemporary performance³ enables a multiplicity of position-takings to occur, both in the encounter with work and in the thinking process that unfolds as a result.

Here I want to flesh out the specific characteristics of the process of critical writing about performance, working from the parallel with Pollock's painting, Arendt's thinking on action and interpretation, and the multiplicity of position-takings that the writer takes in relation to performance.

I see Arendt's shift from political theory to philosophy as marked by a move from the external world of appearances, the public realm, to the internal world of the thinking being. The poetics of this journey make Arendt an apt frame through which to consider the ways in which the poiesis of critical processes of duration, multiplicity of sites and bodily terrains is configured by the activity of thinking and by action itself.

³ In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators signals a shared materiality and an event that displace the specificity of transactions of meaning in performance. The aestheticity of performance is manifested in the nature of the event, foregrounded through an autopoietic feedback loop, the 'mutual interaction between actors and spectators' (2008 p.163) a destabilisation of binary operations and situations of liminality.

For Arendt, appearance is 'something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves' (1958 p.50). Our feeling for reality and, as such, our relationship to reality is governed by appearance, as that which provides a realm in which to see 'what is worthy of being seen or heard' (Arendt 1958 p.51). In this manner, action is that which situates both the individual and, I propose, critical text into the realm of appearance. So what of the processes that make it come into being? What might this thinking offer in terms of approaches to training?

Critical writing about performance occurs over a specific duration, in a particular process of interpretation that begins with performance as the referent, and ends with the critical output – the text itself. In this manner, critical writing extends the eventness of its referent, and constitutes an event in and of itself. Within this process, multiple relationships to the referent unfold, be they through the ways in which the writer grapples with her memory to recall parts of the performance, or engages in interpretive processes that situate her within specific moments of that event.

A similar discussion on position-taking and process can be found in the context of architecture, with Jane Rendell's *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*. Building on her research on critical spatial practice, in which she proposes that 'criticism is a form of spatial practice in its own right' (2010 p.2), Rendell considers the sites in which an artwork is constructed, exhibited and documented. These sites of engagement 'which are material, emotional, political and conceptual' (2010 p.1) are examined and explored as modes of critical

writing. Considering the tradition of situated criticism, Rendell questions a range of interpretive attitudes that consider the critic as a specific art user, engaged in decentred experiences and reliant on her articulation of proximity.

The implications of this form of critical engagement take into account the specificity of modes of viewing and using art, and the duality of the interpreter/performer in the work. Most importantly, Rendell suggests that meaning is not fixed, it is a process and mode of engagement. Rendell combines associative and attentive models of critical writing, creating a series of interlocking 'sites' with the work itself.

There are, however, distinct differences between an encounter with architecture, where such positioning offers a methodological investigation into relationships of viewing and habitation, and with performance, where positioning remains the marker of different forms of relating with and participating in meaning-making processes. But it is possible to conceptualise this position-taking in the realm of critical process in relation to performance: here, I move away from a literal, spatial orientation in relation to the referent, and towards an examination of modes of relating to the different variables that shape the unfolding of the critical process in relation to performance.

In critical processes in relation to performance, 'site', as defined by Rendell, can be constituted with regard to the multiplicity of positions that the critic takes.

The critically engaged subject navigates between thinking, encountering, interpreting and articulating. Site can therefore be extended to encompass a

multiplicity of position-takings towards the activities that it contains. It becomes both a contextual spatialisation and a way of accounting for multiplicity.

It is, however, equally important to acknowledge that this multiplicity of positions is also, to some extent, returning to a body. I am speaking not only of the corporeality of the critic, but also the bodies that are recalled and acted in the process of criticism: bodies of performers, bodies of work. In *Bodies That Matter*, the philosopher Judith Butler argues that 'bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves' (1993 p.ix). This is testament to the nature of corporeality and the thinking body. The body is material, Butler reminds us; she fleshes out the thinking body as a challenge to think about the meaning of 'construction itself' (ibid.).

The embodied activities of thinking and interpretation construct modes of withdrawal as well as mark the presence of the critic; they allow for an extrapolation of critical process that is embodied, occurring over a specific duration. Therefore the body becomes a site of critical process, as much as the locus of its natality. I speak of the body not as a mode of recall towards identity politics, but as a relevant site of process, and a fundamental aspect of critical writing. Criticism is always of the body, in as much as it is of the work.

There is a final aspect of the critical process I want to describe here, and that is duration. Henri Bergson differentiates between real duration – *durée réelle* – and mechanistic time. I am interested in his articulation for the way it foregrounds the roles that consciousness and perception play in duration. In

critical process, shaped by the activities that thought and interpretation occupy, duration is that which grounds the way these activities unfold, in a multiplicity of sites.

Fundamental to Bergson's articulation of duration is a differentiation between time and space. Bergson argues that it is possible 'to conceive the successive moments of time independently of space' (2002 p.50). This understanding relates to my conceptualisation of critical process, because it accounts for the multiplicity of sites in which critical process unfolds, the multiple temporalities that it covers, and the duration that frames them. Duration, in this instance, frames a process of recalling the event of performance, whilst constituting the critical output in the present.

The critical process is informed and shaped by a poiesis of duration, body and site, characterised by multiplicity and framed by the encounter with performance. I propose however, that it might be useful for our discussion to consider the relationship between description and action in the critical text. In this way, I examine how training can occur through a process of appearance, in a productive manner for the writer or critic.

Description: thinking as action in the critical text

In *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing*, Mieke Bal focuses on the artwork as a means to develop a strategy for art writing⁴ that champions the moment of viewing. I am interested in the ways in which she both deploys and speaks of description and its role in enacting as well as giving presence to the artwork. Shifting the discussion from art writing to art criticism, I want to acknowledge the presence of criticality in the tensions that description discloses, and evidence how this treatment and play with writing and subjectivity might offer ways of signalling the presence of action as a marker of a critical text within the process of writing, as much as a gesture that suggests its coming into being. Action is, here, both made present through language and dependent on the movements and encounter with the referent. Action, I propose, engages a process of recall in which memory and aesthetics play an important part in bringing the reader into a gentle confrontation with processes of meaning-making.

I acknowledge the distinct difference between an artwork that is also a sculptural object, and a performance, with its spectatorial implications; as well as the difference between art writing as interested in the disclosure of subjectivity over criticality, and criticism. However Bal 's writing is relevant

⁴ Art writing holds two meanings here. On the one hand, it stands in for the variety of modes of writing about art, from essays to reviews and creative responses. On the other, it also refers to the specialised practice of presenting text as art, as developed in the context of fine art through university programmes (Goldsmiths and Royal College of Art, for example) and publications (Dot Dot Dot, *The Happy Hypocrite*, *Cabinet*, to name a few). Here I refer to art writing as a specialised practice in which text that emerges from art, is presented *as* art.

because it evidences multiplicity, whilst giving visibility to the interaction between thought and meaning:

Are they sculptures? Installations? Buildings? All and none. Triggers of fantasy and strong statement on art, time and individual and communal life, Louise Bourgeois' series *Cells* folds such categorical denominations of media and genre into one another. [...] From the series or genre of works called *Femme-Maison*, which explores the relationship between body and building, to the overtly built *Cells*, the architectural is present in Bourgeois' art. (2001 p.1)

Bal's operations in this passage are not solely descriptive; they contain references to bodies of work, yet also disclose the body of the writer, marked not only by the title of the section – *Entrance* – but also by the rhetorical devices deployed. I am interested in the ways in which this passage teeters on the edges of description, whilst proposing explanatory claims for the work at the same time. This position is informed by Bal's foregrounding of the theoretical nature of the artwork, which marks it as a theoretical object, which 'has something to contribute to the way we look at art' (2001 p. xiv). The theoretical object allows us to gain insight into Bal's relationships, for it discloses the ways in which, to her, a work of art deploys 'its own artistic and [...] visual medium to offer and articulate thought about art' (2001 p.3). In this manner, the theoretical object is reflexive and meta-discursive, but it also accounts for its own process: it suggests wider discourses beyond its own borders, and provides modes of reflection on the condition of potentiality. Bal also suggests a narrative of artistic development, positioning *Cells* in a chronology of practices that overtly, but differently, deal with body and architecture.

The passage below reflects the ways in which elements of description, thinking and meaning constitute a formalised articulation in the critical text:

Over this piece of fabric, the enormous spider's leg that is nearest to it curves back to the fabric, duplicating in three-dimensional space the S-shape of the missing part of the woman's body. This leg is the only one that goes back to the cage and stays there. Of the seven legs, the other six bend toward the cage, in a variety of curves, then at the last moment, hover or recede. All seven legs are clearly lively, contributing to the counterpoint of the ancient, woven architecture: they embody anti regularity. (Bal 2001: 11)

Here Bal follows the sculptural artwork whilst disclosing its identity explicitly for readers who have not encountered it. In this manner, the text both precedes and follows the work, whilst navigating gently the conventions of description. Bal deploys criticality in the manner in which she enacts the encounter with the referent – in this instance, Bourgeois' work. I propose that the poetics of her language disclose a multiplicity of positions, whilst also moving beyond the linguistic, to the realm of the image. Bal is the viewer, but she is also part of this encounter with the figure, which is magnified and shrunk in its presence to serve the purposes of the description. The passage speaks cinematically, with movement, of bodily terrains, with surfaces, and evocatively through language.

Arendt's musings on thought become useful here, for they allow a way to make visible the marks and traces left by the description, disclosing occasional moments in which meaning and knowledge are communicated. In Bal's writing, subjectivity is disclosed through description, but also through the action of the

body as it is writing and observing. This suggests a tension between the encounter with the work, the writer's presence, and the emerging textual poetics. Once more, action is created in the gestures of the language, and in the presence of the referent.

Bal provides further insight into what informs the operations of description that she deploys in the passage. At the onset of the section, titled 'Description Shipwrecked' she ascribes to description a giving of agency, a bringing into existence (2001 p.2). At the same time, she warns of the dangers of description being foregrounded as the sole intent of writing, creating a 'bond with the subject that it is speaking about' (ibid.). Bal argues that it is the result of the participation of the 'viewing subject that any description [...] melts into the narration of the process that makes it possible' (2001 p.4).

The enmeshment of description with narration discloses the process of the constitution of the critical text. In this manner, the activity of thinking makes itself present in the absence of the encounter. This is a relationship of equivalence, in which the referent is overtly given a presence, which is, nevertheless, incomplete, and subjectively constituted. I recall the same identification of the relationship between referent and critical writing in the context of performance, which can never be entirely grasped, but which is made present, distorted and interpreted through description, and through the actions traced in the critical text.

I find it possible to access the processes of subjectivisation and criticality through an exploration of description in the critical text, as a marker of critical process. In description, I associate thinking with excavating meaning, and also with an activation of action as recounted by the text, and ignited in the reader.

In the work of Arendt, I locate a distinction between thought as interruption, and knowledge as collectively constituted. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt considers thought at length, drawing on Ancient Greek rhetoric and philosophy, Hegelian metaphysics and Kantian transcendentalism, navigating language and metaphor. Her language is one of gentle conflict – ‘the warfare between thought and common sense’ (Arendt 1971 p.80–92) – and her metaphors position will, agency and appearance in a shared fabric. Language and thought are interconnected for Arendt (1971 p.100). In her work she seeks to understand action and thought as generative and constitutive of a public realm.

In Arendt, thinking that enters the public realm is always fuelled by action, which is how we enter the realm of appearance: ‘the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (1958 p. 199). Thinking, for Arendt, is always reflexive (1971 p.88) yet directed in its temporary withdrawal. In that sense it is an occupant of the body that is both mobile and, by its reflexivity, external.

When reflecting on action in critical writing for the purposes of training, I note the ways in which description can be understood as a process that discloses the writer’s encounter with the work, and marks the emergence of the critical text in

the public sphere. Action, in this instance, is both a conceptualisation of the encounter with performance marked through language, and a gesture towards it that enters the text into a wider conversation in the public sphere. It suggests, I propose, a politics of writing that can be examined, shaped and moulded in training, providing a way into examining the characteristics of the critical text as they pertain to site, bodily territories and duration.

The encounter with the referent in critical process constitutes a set of temporary, unreliable memories that are recalled in the critical text. By paying close attention to the processes through which these memories emerge in the text, I gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which subjectivity and criticality might collide in writing about performance. If thinking is material in criticism, it is also not un-perceivable. Arendt's own analysis reveals this trait, foregrounding our awareness of the activity of thought as it is being undertaken.

Thinking occurs in-between, and is woven into processes of spectating and articulating, between acts of meaning-making in the theatre event and in the processes that generate interpretation. Thinking, therefore, takes a form that is both aesthetic and political in criticism, and can be accessed through an engagement with the processes of the critical text. The ontology of action in Arendt's thought suggests a different dimension to the aesthetic and political in thinking; action is present in critical process not through this activity, but as informed and fuelled by it.

Towards an architecture of training

Action, for Arendt, is a mode through which a public realm of appearance is maintained and an expression of freedom. In this manner, it is constitutive of other activities. For critical process and its poiesis, it invites appearance as the manner through which description and criticality collide.

Action for Arendt is generative. 'It is the nature of beginning,' she tells us, 'that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before' (1958, p.177-8). Arendt relates action and speech closely as modes through which we insert ourselves into the realm of appearances, and disclose ourselves. This conceptualisation offers a way to rethink training in relation to critical process. Training offers a site through which the writer encounters her own subjectivity and memory, and explores her critical positioning. It is through training that we re-spectate performance, as well as our own relationship to writing itself.

Considering that description is that which discloses the writer, but also suggests a reconsideration of the different positions she takes towards the work, sites she encounters in her process, and terrains she crosses in her thinking, an architecture of training could be developed that is concentrated explicitly on this particular, process-based aspect of the critical text. Description in criticism must disclose a gentle conflict, through which criticality emerges, and in which action can be located as the marker of its appearance in the public sphere.

This is accessed not only through the process of reworking a text; but also through paying recourse to traces of thoughts, unfinished sentences, brief plays

with memory and recall – movements away from the text, that ultimately return the writer to her work with a different architecture in mind. Pollock's painting, which triggered my journey in this article, becomes an analogy for the different manifestations of action in the critical text, and the confrontations that description stages between writer and criticality, performance and language.

Pollock's painting embodies a tension between the referent (its title), and the markers of description (traces of paint). But importantly, it can exist independently of its title and the tension that imposes, in the same manner in which, I propose, the critical text can gain a level of independence from performance. Shakespeare's work of art might still be experienced in Pollock's painting, even if the viewer does not understand the reference; this nuanced engagement makes it possible to think more expansively about the relationships produced by critical writing about performance. This suggests, I propose, an approach to training that displaces concerns for authorship and authority in favour of the processes of appearance, as well as an analytical approach to the process of writing.

Scalapino says writing provides the possibility of a space for unpacking, but also staging action. It is through description that this unpacking occurs, as the mode through which performance is rendered present in the critical text; and it is training that offers us an examination of the possibilities of action in the critical text, both as a process of encounter with subjectivity and one of engaging with performance.

Throughout my exploration of action, description and process in critical writing, I have sought to return to an encounter with the referent, and confront its presence in the descriptive nature of critical texts. This process often discloses a multiplicity of threads not fully followed, or ideas not quite resolved. In accessing process and fuelling a reconsideration of the structures that have led to the creation of the text, I gain an understanding of the ways in which subjectivity and criticality collide, but also allow space for thinking as a process in and of itself. This results in a kind of freeing of critical writing from its referent, whilst accounting for the interdependence of the two.

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