Doing Practice as Research

Why?
After I read the last words of a lecture given by performance maker Danae Theodoridou on practice as research, I got interested in understanding PaR through actually doing it. Speaking about PaR, Theodoridou says it means:

> "to renegotiate distinctions between modes of thinking and stage practices in such a way that, after spending some time in this practice, one performs as she thinks, writes as she performs, reads as she writes. In all cases she acts moved by similar imperatives pushing her to delve deeper into recurrent research questions" (Theodoridou 2013)

That the imbrication of doing and thinking lies at the heart of PaR is affirmed by theatre scholar Robin Nelson who calls such doing-thinking 'praxis' (Nelson 2013). Under the supervision of Nirav Christophe, I will be doing a practice as research project to develop my praxis skills. Ultimately, my aim is to investigate the concept of presence in an artistic, practice based environment.

What is the set-up of the PaR project?
I will be working as practitioner-researcher in a small European team, collaborating with a scenographer (Rhian Morris, HKU MA Scenography, UK), an actor (Ferdinand Doumic, FR) and a dramaturg (Joost Seegers, NL). Having the most experience in making and seeing theatre, I will start working within the frame of a theatrical set-up (meaning a fixed perspective of the spectators on the performance as well as a fixed duration). The theme of the project has been developed in an earlier collaboration between me and Rhian, and is about the circular motion of the earth which gives life and takes life. I recognize such circular motion in performances like *Schwalbe Speelt een Tijd* (Schwalbe 2015, Theatre), *While we Strive* (Arno Schuitenmaker 2015, Dance) and *Future* (David Claerbout 2016, Visual arts). From the perspective of digital culture, the idea of circularity also conveys an idea of wholesomeness, resisting a common sense of fragmentation. Remarkably enough, these performances that we identify with circular motion, all in some way play with long and slow processes.

What is the project's material?
We call the form of what we want to make a 'scenographic poem'.[1] Whereas 'just' poetry expresses itself through the language of words, a scenographic poem expresses itself through theatrical language, which involves words, sounds and images. In our research we will be creating a theatrical language, and therefore we will be working with three materials: (1) an actual poem as a source of inspiration, (2) the body of the actor as human performer, and (3) digital video technology. Throughout the process we will be doing experiments that involve all three materials, which implies we will be doing an iterative process. That will enable us to fully explore the potential of the material and how these work together best as theatrical language.

    The poem we work with is *Four Quartets,* a set of poems written by T.S. Eliot (Eliot 1943).

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[1] This term is partly inspired by the artist Julian Hetzel who frames his performance *I'm not here says the void* as 'visual poem' and partly by the conceptual work of Hans-Thies Lehmann who speaks about 'scenic poetry' as form of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2008).

It is based on the ancient four elements of nature, and is recognized as a poem that addresses man's relationship with time and the divine. It is suitable for our project since our common language is English. Also it invites us to work with text in a non-dramatic way. It invites us to use its structure and to work with its rhythm. Since we don't have a lot of time, we cannot analyse, let alone, comprehend the poem in its full complexity. This is not a problem since the quest of this research is not to transform a poem into a space. We make a scenographic poem and we use *Four Quartets* as a source of inspiration to create a theatrical language.

So far I have found two fundamental aspects of the poem that are interesting for the composition of our theatrical language. Firstly, the poem is full of paradoxes (or: the unity of opposites).[2] My experience of reading the poem gives me a sense of being in a continuous state of change, like waves in the sea. There is never one autonomous image or it is contrasted with an opposite image or juxtaposed with another. There is never a rhythm that goes on so that you disappear in it. New rhythms interfere continuously, forcing you gently to go along in changing motions; forcing you gently to shift attention continuously, fluently. Indeed, the succession of rhythms and images in *Four Quartets* is best expressed in fluid motion.

As T.S. Eliot writes himself in an essay on the social function of poetry, it is in the nature of poetry to *feel* in the language of words (Eliot 19). With that idea in mind we can say that Eliot is able to express fluidly a variety of ways to feel in the English language. Since we are not working with language per see, we are facing the challenge to create a composition with our three materials at hand, through which an equal variety of feelings can be addressed to an audience.

As for the technology, we'll have to figure out what kind of technology we will be exactly using. So far we will be working with a camera, a projector and 'Isadora' (video software for performance). As for the body of the performer: we will be looking for actions that bring about paradoxes in relation with the technology and the poem, starting from the verbs of the poem. A verb in Dutch is '*werkwoord*' which literally means 'work word'. This Dutch understanding of 'verbs' implies a sort of action, which we are looking for.

Investigating Presence in Practice

I aim to compose a theatrical language with *Four Quartets*, digital video technology and the body of the actor in such a way that the material becomes expressive in terms of presence. So far I understand three main perspectives on presence: we can focus on the presence of the (human) performer, we can focus on the presence experience of the spectator and we can focus on a more environmental notion of presence in which all the present actors and objects and devices are enhanced in their interrelatedness. Another approach to presence is the triadic model of theatre scholar Cormac Power (Power 2008), who distinguishes between three ideal modes of presence: auratic presence (referring to a presence that is loaded with mystical power), literal presence (referring to the enhancement of the materiality of what is there) and fictional presence (referring to an illusory presence). Overall I need to continue reading about presence, which I will do for my internship, to crystallise these ideas into workable and recognizable and applicable concepts. So far the model of Power is the most pragmatic approach to presence.

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[2] One of the two epigraphs is a paradoxical quote from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, namely: "the way upward and the way downward is one and the same".

Bibliography

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