

This article is a contribution to the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project 2018-2021, Output Phase #01 'Setting the framework', Workpackage 2 'Map Ethics!'.

Lead Partner: University of Bergen (Norway), Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design.

Project website: <https://advancingsupervision.eu/>

Publication website: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/699306/785570>



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Perspectives on Ethics in Performance Practice

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Abstract

Ethics and aesthetics are closely related in artistic practice. This text argues for the necessity of rendering the ethics behind notions of intuition, taste, or aesthetic choices more conscious and articulate when the artist moves into research practices within an academic framework. The ethics discussed here are existential and not rule bound. It implies ethics as a reciprocal process that is always situation specific. In the first section I use the Danish philosopher Knud E. Løgstrup's ethical philosophy when discussing the performance *Cinderella*¹ by Ann Liv Young. Løgstrup sees ethics as a given (through birth) relational practice of codependency. In the second part I draw on object-oriented philosophy when discussing an 'ethics of the unknown'. This approach demands an acknowledgement of that which we cannot fully grasp and understands humans as all entangled in co-dependent relationships with everything around us. My argument is that as researchers we need to reveal more of these interdependent relationships as it challenges our concept of authorship, ownership, and audience relations, as much as it also sheds light on aesthetic ideologies and value systems. I use two performances, which deal with documents connected to the terror attack on 22 July 2011 in Norway, to discuss these ethical approaches to artistic practice: Christian Lollike and Olaf Højgaards performance *Manifest 2083* and *Breivik's Erklring* by Milo Rau.

Introduction

A central aspect of artistic research ethics concerns orientation and transparency related to aesthetic choices and preferences. When art practice turns into artistic research, there is a need for the artist to consciously situate herself in regard to her practice and her materials. What are the deep beliefs, cultural and personal values that drive desire and intuition in the process of art creation? How does the artist understand her own work and what it does in the spaces where it is presented? Ethics is a question of relations and power of definition, of our understanding of self and others; thus it pertains to the encounters we have with and in the world, and questions of how we act – and react – in specific situations. The ethics I will discuss in the following is existential and not rule bound. In this framework, ethics is specific to every situation; the adequate ethical behaviour in one situation can be completely inadequate in another. Therefore, I am interested in ethics as a search and continuous process of asking questions concerning relational and aesthetic orientations.

Feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed writes about how our orientation matters.² How we orientate ourselves is how things become significant to us and materialise in relation to our own bodies. Things and spaces also have an orientation, which makes some people feel

¹ Ann Liv Young, *Cinderella*, 2010.

² Sara Ahmed, "Orientations Matter" in *New Materialisms, Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010).

welcomed into a space and others not. Orientation is about our starting point, from where we experience what we perceive as reality. Because that is our point of orientation, it also tends to be taken for granted as becoming a blind spot. Ethics in relation to artistic practice is to look at your 'here' and be aware of your orientations.

The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body and the 'where' of its dwelling.³

Ahmed's thinking connects to object-oriented philosophy, corresponding to the way scholars such as Timothy Morton,⁴ Jane Bennett,⁵ Graham Harman⁶ and many others have discussed our relation to things and matter. Object-oriented ontology (OOO) argues that what we orientate ourselves towards also reveals itself to us, but only partly. We cannot view anything from all points of view at once. We can never grasp reality in its entirety; all things have sides that withdraw from perception. What is revealed and withdrawn in an object or material is in constant movement and transformed according to what else it stands in relation to at a specific moment. This means that we can never know our material fully; it keeps transforming and revealing new aspects of itself. As human beings and researchers, we are part of this ongoing movement of shaping and being shaped, appearing and disappearing as our physical bodies are also material and being affected by its' relations.

When we as humans orientate towards something, other things draw back into the background, as Ahmed discusses in her text. Anything that we have in the frame of our perception is surrounded by other things that shape its background, and thus all other things are part of shaping the thing we orientate towards. The point is that as artistic researchers we need to become more aware of the surroundings, or background, and question why we orientate ourselves the way we do, and perhaps challenge our perceptual habits. As Ahmed points out: '*...we are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including not only physical objects [...] but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgement, or objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives*'.⁷ Orientation connects to time and labour: the time and work we do together with our material in the process of transformation of both. Things come to matter when 'bodies do things, and things also do bodies'.⁸ Ahmed also emphasises that orientation takes time, and that what we orientate ourselves towards

³ Ahmed, "Orientations Matter", 236.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter – A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010)

Graham Harman et al. *The Third Table = Der Dritte Tisch* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ; Kassel : Documenta Und Museum Friedrichianum Verabstaltungs-GmbH, 2012).

⁷ Ahmed, "Orientations Matter", 246.

⁸ Ahmed, "Orientations Matter", 245.

(be it concepts, themes or specific aesthetic forms) points to a future that is not yet present. This connects closely to the world making of much artistic practice.

To briefly outline how to understand ethics here, it deals with how we relate to things around us: How we perceive and live our relations – that is, how we act based on our worldviews and values. We are born in – and into – relations. There is no way we can be outside relations. Relations are not ordered, they are chaotic, always in flux and in motion. We all have an ethics. It is simply impossible to be un-ethical; that is just another kind of ethics.

[T]o be located “in” space or “in” time is already to have been caught in a web of relations [...] [Things] are caught in the fields of, and otherwise “spaced” and “timed” by other entities.⁹

The object-oriented philosophy that frames the ethics I work from here argues that humans are all entangled in co-dependent relationships with everything around us. It means we are shaped as much as we shape things. My argument is that as researchers we need to reveal more of these interdependent relationships as it challenges our concept of authorship and ownership with respect to our artistic results.

Ethics as a relational practice (theoretical perspectives)

What are the connections between ethics and aesthetics? As researchers within artistic practice there is a need to become more conscious of how our ethics are manifested aesthetically, or how the aesthetics we work with reflect our ethics. What are the driving forces in my work? What is it that makes me choose something in favour of something else? How do I relate not only to my human collaborators but also to the material I deal with, the spaces I work in – the environment? How does the material I work with affect me and the aesthetic choices I make? The point is not to find definite answers but to regularly check in with personal motivations for working with a specific material in a specific way. Within artistic practice and research, there is no ethics in general (that would turn into moral rules). This field cannot operate with ethical guidelines like those we find in journalism. In artistic practice ethics is always a process whereby one confronts possible courses of action in a specific situation. As ethics is always situation specific, the answers regarding how to act will vary in relation to each situation we work in, thus we need to keep asking questions.

The ethics I work with can be understood as ‘pre-logic’, which concerns how humans act before they have had time to think about a specific situation. It could also be framed as a phenomenological ethics. The well-known ethical thinker Emmanuel Levinas is grounded in phenomenology and so is his contemporary Knud Ejler Løgstrup, whom I will refer to in the

⁹ Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, 21.

case studies. For both, ethics is not a question of choice but is something that can be said to unfold as a part of our co-existence with other beings. Emmanuel Levinas sees ethical experience as heteronomous – which means a place where my autonomy is called into question through a ‘response-ability’ impacted by the appeal that comes from the face of the other. For Levinas the face of the other is our alterity, our difference and unknown. Philosopher Silvia Benso takes this thought from Levinas further when she writes about things and objects as having an ethical call to humans.¹⁰ Benso critiques, or supplements, Levinas’ sole focus on the human face as that which evokes ethics. She wants to also include the alterity of nonhuman presences. Benso speaks of ‘facialities’ rather than the face: ‘Facialities evoke the possibility of the existence of faceless faces, which, despite their facelessness, are yet endowed with the intimating power of the face to demand an ethical response’.¹¹ Things, then, become the ultimate other, or ‘the other of the other’, which she argues can be accessed through tender touch. I will return to her concept of tenderness later in this essay.

Løgstrup’s ethics is existential. His ethics departs from the fact that we are given life as a gift, born into a situation where trust is a basic part of human life and human relations. The ethical demand that arises in a relation is silent according to him:

‘[T]he demand is implied by the very fact that a person belongs to the world in which the other person has his or her life, and therefore holds something of that person’s life in his or her hands, it is therefore a demand to take care of that person’s life. But nothing is thereby said about how this caring is to be done’.¹²

Løgstrup is sceptical to a point of departure for ethics and moral rules as a symmetric situation between equals because he is worried that responsibility will be turned into duty, which in turn becomes rights, and this can result in a relation based on contract. He is concerned with ethics as a structure of power, which is inherent through the way humans are given life and how we live in reciprocal co-dependency with each other. The ethical demand that lies inherent in the fact that we have been given life connects to the power we have in our relations with others. The arts can be seen as a situation and relation, not of equals, but of where one part invites the other to partake in reflective dialogue. It is the artist, and/or the institution, who sets the frame and thus holds the power of definition through designing the framework of the encounter. For the most part the arts meet its audiences in public or semi-public (art institutions) spaces; its audiences are mixed but not all individuals hold the same

¹⁰ Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics* (SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 2000).

¹¹ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*, xxx.

¹² Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*. Revisions (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 22.

privileges to be seen and heard. The artist (or the institution) controls the situation and has spent more time working on giving form to whatever is being processed than the regular viewer spends with the same work. How do we live and act with these relational power structures, and as researchers, how do we articulate the ethics we operate with?

In Løgstrup's words the ethical demand lies inherent in human life and calls for us to act and take care of the life that trust has placed in our hands¹³ as if '*we are holding a part of the life of the other in the palm of our hands*'.¹⁴ It is a radical demand he says, because it is unspoken, and thus 'it is up to the individual himself to determine what will best serve the other person'.¹⁵ Ethics as a relational practice demands risk taking, exposing yourself and letting go of some ego structures. I must dare failure, which demands courage in ethical action. Løgstrup operates with the concept of the ethical demand as a radical demand, because it is a demand that he claims is impossible to fully meet. The ethical demand is radical, says Løgstrup, because I can never know if the way I choose to act will serve the other's needs. I am responsible for the part of the life of the other that I hold in my hands on any occasion and for my own actions in response to each situation.

No matter how many variations of communication there exist between us, it always consists of daring to reveal a trust hoping to be met. This is the nerve in all communication, as well as the grounding phenomena of ethical life.¹⁶

Trusting Cinderella (case study 1)

In the following I will discuss the performance *Cinderella*¹⁷ by American performance artist Ann Liv Young, in relation to Løgstrup's ethical philosophy. In her performances Young is known for attacking her audience both verbally and physically. In perhaps surprising ways Young plays out scenes of trust through the way she allows her stage persona Sherry to express herself in several of her performances. The performance *Cinderella* deals with sexuality, feminism, racism, class, power, assault, body, and identity politics. In her performance she wants to enter into direct, interactive dialogue with her audience. If you are so unlucky to be picked out as a victim for the conflict she wishes to stage, you have small chances to escape Sherry's temper. It is all very well directed and unpleasant to witness. This is also what Young is looking for; she does not want to please, but to engage us personally. Whether we are provoked or fascinated does not matter to her. As I see it,

¹³ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 18.

¹⁴ Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *Den Ethiske Fordring* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1991).

¹⁵ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 45.

¹⁶ Løgstrup, *Den Ethiske Fordring*, 39.

¹⁷ Ann Liv Young, *Cinderella*, 2010.

underneath the character Sherry, and also the artist identity of Ann Liv Young, lies a vulnerability and care for the audience.

When Løgstrup discusses the radical demand, trust is a fundamental aspect of what he terms the sovereign expressions of life. Spontaneously revealing oneself through speech is one of these expressions that Ann Liv Young performs through her persona Sherry. In theatre and performance, where fiction and reality blur, speech is very often conceived as being fictional, staged and rehearsed. Young, however, wishes to encounter and dialogue with her audiences based on risk and trust, where the speech act is protected by the safe space of fiction (theatre and art space). At the same time, it transgresses that fiction and takes us into the lived reality of each person present. She is looking for the audience's vulnerability while exposing her own through everything she does on stage. She utilises references from performance art, but also techniques from stand up. In *Cinderella*, Young alternates between singing loudly and usually falsely into a microphone, overrunning the iTunes songs she plays on her iPad on stage, initiating diverse conversations with the audience, and reading self-reflexive monologues mirroring the conflicts Cinderella/Sherry can be imagined as going through in her isolation, exposing body fluids and flashing breasts, butts and sexual organs. She may interrogate people in the audience about their sexual life and stage a dispute concerning her body weight. Visually we see a kitsch scenography with associations to Disney's pink and blue Cinderella images in what can be called a trash aesthetics.¹⁸

Young's project relates to the work of porn activist, researcher, and performance artist Annie Sprinkle's engagement for more openness and acceptance related to issues of body and sexuality. The reason why I believe many people find Young's performances offensive is both her acts of self-exposure, for instance smearing her naked butt with brown substance, and her direct conversations and provocations, where she often ends up yelling at specific audience members. These acts can be disputed as ethically problematic, and the question of how much artists should care for audiences in specific ways is debatable. Young's project, I believe, is an attempt to break down some of the normative ideas of correct behaviour in public and social spaces. She is looking to exercise what Løgstrup may perceive as spontaneous speech that can happen in the wake of trust, which is a given condition of life but also a radical demand as it is so difficult to meet.

¹⁸ Ann Liv Young, *Cinderella*, preview video (Festival Fremd Politik im Freien Theater 2011 <https://vimeo.com/31087253>).

Audiences freely choose to enter the theatre knowing the context (this was presented at an experimental programming stage venue), and principally, they can leave whenever they want. However, Young makes an exit difficult through the way she controls the space and seemingly plays out her power as the host. No matter how embarrassing the artist makes such an exit, the possibility is still there. Young wants us to take the ethical responsibility to leave if we want, and not stay out of politeness. Thus, she points to the ethical demand as a reciprocal demand, where we all 'hold a part of the other's life in the palm of our hand'. The art context, as a space separated from daily life allowing fiction and speculative narratives, becomes a space where ethics can be tested out and rehearsed. In the art space ethical borders can be crossed in ways that would not be possible in any other public arena. Such a crossing of ethical borders, however, must stay within the framework of theatricality, which performance theorist Josette Féral explains as a process of separation between fiction and reality.¹⁹ She has argued for ways in which the theatrical frame can be broken by activities that violate the 'law of reversibility' such as, for instance, when killing an animal on stage, or when Chris Burden was shot in the arm in a gallery as part of his performance *Shoot* (1971). At moments like these, the space of representation collapses, the border into reality is crossed entirely and the situation cannot be repeated. Young once said to me during a conversation: 'It is theatre, so it is not real. And if there is some place we can test out these things, that should be safe, it is the theatre'.²⁰



Ann Liv Young: *Cinderella* (2010), photo: Christy Pessagno

¹⁹ Josette Féral, and Ronald P. Bermingham, "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language." *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3 (2002): 94-108.

Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality : The Subject Demystified." *Performance ; Vol. 4* 77 (2003): 206-17.

²⁰ Ann Liv Young, interview with Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk, 27 March 2012.

Young encountering Løgstrup

The encounter between Løgstrup and Young starts with trust, which is fundamental for both of them. I believe that Ann Liv Young would not be able to perform her work unless she had as a starting point this fundamental trust of the other. To show trust demands that the other takes care of the trust given, that he or she supports my existence and does not take advantage of my exposed vulnerability. Løgstrup's starting point, as Young's, seems to me to be that of intertwinement of all kinds of existence. I believe this to be Ann Liv Young's main agenda: to make us realise that we all belong to a commonality, and she takes great risks and puts both herself and the audience in highly vulnerable situations. The other important point in Løgstrup's ethics, as well as in Ann Liv Young's performances, is openness of speech, which she is thoroughly exercising in her work. It can be argued that Young's openness of speech is completely merciless and does not take care of the individuals in the audience. I think, however, that Ann Liv Young cares a great deal and that her ethics is close to the ethics articulated by Løgstrup.

What constitutes ethical behaviour for Løgstrup is the idea of '*the sovereign expressions of life*', which he characterises as trust (vs. distrust), openness of speech (vs. holding back/ dissemble), mercy (vs. cruelty/ mercilessness), and hope (vs. hopelessness). The sovereign expressions of life are something we live in, or with, if we do not suppress them, in which case moral guidelines come into play. By speaking openly and trusting the audience not to assault her, Young tries to break open a conventional, and presumably fictional, situation and have individuals in the audience react directly and openly. It is an attempt to flip the act of representation into an experience of relation in the specifically shared time and space. In accordance, Løgstrup explains how these expressions of life can change a situation:

The expressions of life cannot be applied, but can only be realized, as I realize myself in it. [...] It does not rigidify the situation but frees it up, transforms it, which is why the individual must involve himself in it throughout.²¹

Løgstrup's ethics is about acting in ways that offer the possibility for other human beings to realise their life potential. Most people in the audience of Young's performances, however, will feel she is not opening up anything for them at all, rather the opposite. Their reaction to her behaviour is to close in on themselves as a way of protection. Løgstrup underlines that to act ethically implies that you sometimes respond to a call, which is not what the other

²¹ Knud Ejler Løgstrup, and van Kooten Niekerk, Kees, *Beyond the Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 53.

consciously wishes or expects of you in the moment. You can never know what the other wants, so it does not mean to act in accordance with the other's expectations, wishes or needs. I would argue that Young's intentions are to trigger the audience to question their own ethics when encountering her and also when relating to other audience member's reactions. In addition to openness of speech, she is perhaps also calling for acts of mercy and hope both towards the stage and among audience members in the auditorium. She trusts her audience to meet her ethical demand, however provocative it is, and she wants them to take responsibility for how they act upon it. There is no right or wrong, but as Løgstrup writes: 'Even in distrust the other person is still delivered over into my hands. Even my enemy is to a large degree dependent upon me and upon the manner in which I respond to him or her'.²² Young makes it even more difficult for her avant-garde and bourgeois theatre audiences, when her stage persona Sherry is portrayed as a white working-class woman with very direct and unpolished language. The class difference becomes evident and is yet another obstacle for the audience who are called to care for the part of the other's life (in this case Sherry/Young and their fellow audience members) that they are given to hold in their hands. It is indeed a radical ethical demand in this context.

Intentionality and power

Ethics in performance is about intentionality in relation to what is being acted out. I believe Yong's intentions are to find ways for us to relate, to help us realise our fundamental commonality living inside a human body, to help us become aware of our choices. Why do we go to the theatre, what are our expectations, how do we relate to our own and others' bodies, how do we meet injustice, do we speak up, do we take responsibility? She uses the reality of the situation and pushes conflicts in order to make us react, and if so on behalf of other fellow audience members. It is a very active mode of audience participation, where we constantly negotiate how to relate to what is happening. Young also uses her power on stage; she is controlling the situation and is the host in the way all performance makers are. However, the power position of the artist is not fixed, but one that moves and has the potential to shift from artist to audience (or critic and institutional directors). In this case the audience could potentially all leave, or complain, and somehow the invitation in a performance like this is exactly to take the power and demonstrate that it can be revolted against. Perhaps the ethical reflection is effective even if audience members stay polite and only feel and think they would want to leave. Young is aware she is provoking, and she knows she may be attacked, but to her it seems to be worth the price.

²² Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 45.

There are always power relations; the ethical challenge is to let the power over the other serve the other. Artists, and in particular artistic researchers, need to constantly interrogate their motivations for doing things in public in front of an audience. Løgstrup's way to understand ethics seems to be one relevant way to think of ethics in performance because it is not about norms and regulations; it is about a humane attitude towards the other where ethics is understood as a spontaneous expression of life, which connects us to each other and to the universe. A performance like *Cinderella* is staged with intentions of openness of speech, and Young has practiced a way of performing that may trigger ethical reflection. However, there is always an aspect of losing control, and of spontaneous reaction in the oscillating movement on the border between fiction and reality. What I think Ann Liv Young does is stage the crisis, the failure, and the breakdown of ethical behaviour, which Løgstrup explains as the place or the moment when 'we become conscious of that which we should have been led by, but were not'.²³ How do we make ethical decisions? For instance, in the audience of one of Ann Liv Young's performances, how do I decide about my actions and words? Can I speak openly, or do I choose to stay silent? Do I stay, or do I go?

Social behaviour is naturally something we learn as we grow. We learn to act according to cultural and social norms. However, sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we are not able to stick to our morals such as when there is an ethical call, like Young's, where our norms and morals do not work, and we need to respond immediately. The point for Løgstrup is that the sovereign expressions of life are givens; they are in life as life is realised in us. This is why, to him, it is so important to realise the life potential of each other. The sovereign expressions of life are immediate and pre-reflective, thus expressed in moments of improvisation or intuitively through relating to trust, openness of speech, mercy and hope. With Løgstrup, open speech is closely connected to the ethics of the expressions of life, and he writes:

... the spontaneous expressions of life lead a hidden existence. It takes crisis situations, colliding duties, and conflicts to stir them up into consciousness so that we can engage in putting them into words. The formulations of the spontaneous expressions of life, occasioned by crisis, collisions, and conflicts, are ethical norms.²⁴

This is how I see that Ann Liv Young's performances become a gift for her audiences to become conscious of their hidden ethical beings. Her performances offer a situation that reminds me of what Løgstrup calls the sovereign expressions of life, where each member of the audience can experience how the spontaneous expressions are stirred in their bodies,

²³ Løgstrup & van Kooten Niekerk, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 123.

²⁴ Løgstrup & van Kooten Niekerk, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 129.

and perhaps also how social norms and conventions hinder our expressions, reducing trust and its demand, when being part of the crisis Young stages.

Documentary material (case study 2)

In the following I will refer to two performances, both dealing with documentary material related to the attack on the Norwegian government building in the centre of Oslo and a youth camp for the Labour party at Utøya on 22 July 2011: First Christian Lollike's *Manifest 2083* and secondly Milo Rau's performance *Breiviks Erklring*. Both premiered in 2012, around a year after the attacks. I will explore the different ethics that lie behind the aesthetic choices in these productions. In Milo Rau's performance the withdrawn aspect, what I call the unknown of the text, is explicitly given attention and worked with. This is a different approach from Lollike's piece, which operates with an aesthetical ethical framework that is about revealing and gaining knowledge. In my own work as a dramaturg, working on staging documentary material, I have developed a discourse and an ethical vocabulary using concepts from object-oriented philosophy as mentioned in the introduction. In the following I will refer to some of these concepts when exploring these two performances. Naturally, there are many other approaches to understanding ethics, but this has offered me a framework and an ethical platform with which I find resonance, the point being to inspire each researcher to develop an ethical framework that resonates with each specific practice and person.

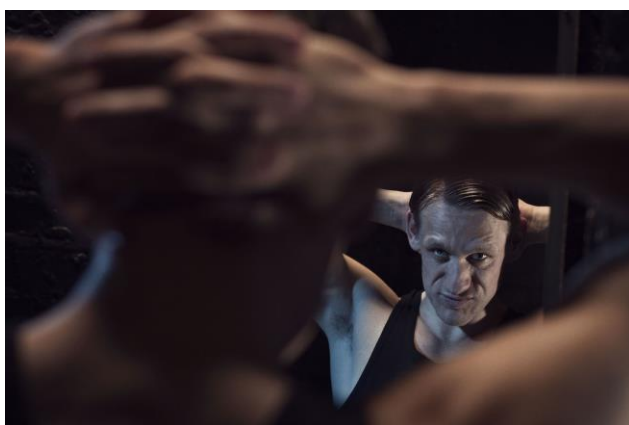
Object-oriented philosophy takes the position of reciprocal dependency as does Lgstrup. However, Lgstrup is concerned with the relations between humans, while this field of philosophy argues that everything is intertwined, connected and interdependent, thus everything affects other things and how things form and are formed. This means that humans shape each other, environments shape people as much as people shape them, and things we relate to in our daily lives shape us as we shape them. Object-oriented philosophy argues that things find form through the relation and encounter between time, place and matter. That is, time and place is also something that is produced through the encounter between things. Through language humans have a tendency to want to frame, understand and define things. This includes defining the things we use and are surrounded with, but it also includes shaping our ideas, thoughts, dreams and stories about ourselves and others. There is a strong need to understand in human nature, and western subjects in particular have a tradition for wanting to control the image or the thing within our own frame of mind, to make each thing intelligible. When locking things in a definite image, it is also denied a life of its own.

Danish dramatist and director Christian Lollike collaborated with actor Olaf Højgaard on the performance *Manifest 2083*. The performance was produced during the trial against the terrorist Anders Behring Breivik (ABB) in Oslo. The performance shows us a man (actor Olaf Højgaard) who says he wants to understand the psychology of the terrorist and how he came to write his manifesto. He operates within an aesthetic regime of mimesis and psychological realism. He stages the attempt to understand Behring Breivik by imitating his movements, his gaze, his looks. Højgaard expresses this in an interview in Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Magazine (my translation):

... going in to try and take on some of his physical gestures, facial expressions, and body build, was a technical ground work I have wanted to do, and which I think can have a big effect. To suddenly feel what a movement means, through it inspiring to understand something, shows that sometimes it is actually possible to go from the outer features to the inner psychology. I continuously stood in front of the mirror until I thought the eyes were there.²⁵

Here I question what effect Højgaard is looking for, what and why he wants to understand, and to what extent is it possible to achieve an understanding. He continues:

I am in no way qualified to consider him, but I have been forced to make some choices. To me it seems that what has hurt and what has felt good inside him, has hurt so much and felt so good that he had to move it outside himself, to stage this battle outside himself.²⁶



Christian Lollike and Olaf Højgaard *Manifest 2083*, photo: Søren Solkær/Starbird

²⁵ Olaf Højgaard, interview with Therese Bjørneboe, *Norsk Shakespeare og Teatertidskrift* nr. 4/2012), 55.

²⁶ Olaf Højgaard, interview, 55.

Højgaard's work exposes his understanding that the two artists are the sole creators, and they are on a quest to capture knowledge through a framing of their chosen subject. Together they shape, work, and make an effort to understand through mimetic gestures. It is an attempt to expose an intelligible image of the terrorist, but for what purpose? Is it in order to make us 'see' the terrorist, and will this at all give an understanding of the complexity of ABB? Simultaneous to Højgaard's process, the Oslo Court House spent several weeks trying to understand the motives of ABB and if he could be seen as psychologically responsible for his acts or not. What do Højgaard and Lollike want by this mimetic aesthetics, and what ethical beliefs connect to it? The aesthetification of ethics is in this case concerned with identification, image-making and the idea that knowledge of trauma can be revealed and exposed. This was done through a confrontation with fear, which at the time of the performance still was present at least in the Norwegian audience. It can be argued that the safe space of the theatre could confront the fear, but little space was given to work through that feeling.

There is a discourse here pointing toward knowing, understanding and exposing acting skills of identification, as opposed to not knowing, questioning and exposing fragility, precariousness and uncertainty. The ethical position they take seems to be of the one having gained knowledge and shared it with the less knowledgeable audience. If we go back to Levinas, we could focus on the response-ability that faces the subject in the encounter with the face of the other, in this case ABB and/or the audience. What would that mean for Lollike and Højgaard? Or with Løgstrup who stresses that what he calls the ethical demand is radical because it is unfulfillable; it represents something unreachable that we can only aspire to meet. There are supposedly two stable and separate subjects at play in *Manifest 2083*: that of Højgaard and ABB, where one is in a position of power to understand the narrative of the absent other.

In theatre there is a tradition to analyse a text so I can give it *my* interpretation, through the staging and aesthetic choices, which I convey successively to an audience. The conventional theatre audience is also often interested to see how a director or a company have interpreted a known text from acclaimed dramatists like Shakespeare or Ibsen. I have questioned how we can avoid taking ownership of material when giving it aesthetic form. I am interested in finding ways to let go of a text, especially a documentary text, to set it free, to dare not understanding it fully. Therefore, I have chosen to study the text, be it a score, a written text, an oral witness account, or a choreography, as a thing or material in the object-oriented conception of it: a thing with an unknown aspect, a hidden face, something that we cannot

perceive and understand. Philosopher Silvia Benso speaks about the ethical call of things.²⁷ With reference to Emanuel Levinas' notion of the ethical call of the face of the other, Benso sees things and objects as the ultimate alterity – the other of the other.

Text as thing

To explore a text in performance, and how it becomes a thing, means to see the text as a relational and connective tool through which proximity, intimacy, trust, power, violence, distrust, and distance is played out and presented. Text as a thing within performance becomes an occasion and a place to rehearse, negotiate and exercise ethics. In documentary theatre and performance, the text material consists of spoken memories from informants, or various extracts of documents from a situation like the trial of ABB. How truthful, or authentic, can a documentary theatre piece really be, and is this at all an interesting question? The question is, perhaps, rather how close are we able to get to something we experience as 'real' or authentic?

Ethics is about how much reality one is able to maintain, says Silvia Benso, who continues to argue that what is good is 'what preserves the maximum of reality from destruction'.²⁸ This points to a perception of reality as a partly constructed idea or image that is unstable. Thus, it can be deconstructed, changed, and rebuilt. As Sarah Ahmed points out, orientation matters and shapes our perception of the real. This leads to an understanding of reality as neither 'true' nor 'false'; it always contains both. Related to object-oriented thinking, a thing is never stable in its form but changes according to its context and what it stands in relation to. As mentioned, any thing will reveal only parts of its reality and withdraw other parts as a fluctuating field of potentialities. When thinking of *Manifest 2083*, the chosen aesthetics work from a logic of mimesis where there is an attempt to form a coherent narrative, a representation of ABB on stage. The argument here is that coherence does not exist because the I, as much as the representation of the I, fluctuates and is never stable. My question is how to work with a text from an ethics that draws, for instance, on object-oriented philosophy, where the text understood as a thing will never reveal itself completely. The actor will never be able to capture or understand completely what he or she performs. It calls for a deep listening that penetrates the body and actively relates to the uttered words,²⁹ as well as a sensibility toward how the words and stories move and affect the performer's body as

²⁷ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*.

²⁸ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*, 131.

²⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, and Mandell, Charlotte, *Listening. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

much as they do the audience. It demands an acceptance of the unknown: that the text always withdraws parts of itself and can never be fully grasped and understood.

Ethics of the Unknown

Who owns a story? Do we own our life stories? Is life experience not something entangled and intertwined with everything else in existence? Where are the borders between 'me' and 'you', me and that thing, me and a character? When someone's life experience, or witness account, is turned into a performance text to be spoken, how can that text be performed with tenderness? In Milo Rau's performance *Breiviks Erklrung*, which premiered almost at the same time as Lollike's piece, there is a different ethical relation to the text material, which produces another aesthetic form than that in *Manifest 2083*. The performance is a reading, where the performer reads ABB's legal explanation from the second day of his trial on 17 April 2012, which is available online. Milo Rau says, as opposed to Lollike and Hjgaard, that he is not interested in the person Breivik, so the actress is not in any way supposed to illustrate anything. Rau even says that this is not theatre. When developing the idea of an ethics of the unknown, I will later return to Silvia Benso and her concept of *tenderness*³⁰ as an ethical way of relating to things through touch.

The actress in Milo Rau's performance presents a text she does not claim to understand; on the contrary, it is the unknown that is staged. The documentary text is voiced to the audience with question marks. The form is non-mimetic: a female performer reading from papers with a distance, emphasising pauses and still moments. The text is read with a musical sensibility, where the actress Sascha . Soydan plays with different rhythms in the text exploring its layers of meaning in the moment of performing. Her face is simultaneously filmed and directly projected on a big screen to the left on stage. She is chewing gum.

³⁰ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*, 159.



The actress Sascha Ö. Soydan reads the statement of Anders B. Breivik during his trial in Oslo.
Photo: Thomas Müller. Copyright: IIPM – International Institute of Political Murder

In an article in *Morgenbladet*, Siemke Böhnisch points out that the way actress Sascha Ö. Soydan listens when speaking the text in Rau's performance creates a situation where the audience becomes aware of its own act of listening.³¹ Instead of the performer being in focus, it is the text that stands in the centre of attention. The actress listens to the text as she speaks and materialises it. She listens together with the audience. She encounters the text again, seemingly discovering new layers of meaning in the moment of performing. She explores the text together with the audience in a highly staged situation of juxtaposing signs that makes images flicker without rest. There is another set of aesthetic parameters at play here than what I wrote about regarding *Manifest 2083*. Rau is not looking for a logical

³¹ Siemke Böhnisch, "Å gi Breivik en scene," *Morgenbladet*, June 30, 2015, <https://morgenbladet.no/2015/06/gi-breivik-en-teaterscene>.

representation, and he is not aspiring to present an intelligible narrative or any kind of truth. There is a female body (possibly of Turkish descent), standing behind a lecture stand, in front of a video camera, possibly referring to the court room situation without imitating it. Does the text here belong to Breivik, to the actress performing it, to Milo Rau or to the audience? My claim would be that the text has its own agency and is formed in relation to space and time and everything else the text happens to entangle with in the moment of performance.

Here Rau reveals a side of ethics different from that Højgaard and Lollike were working from. Rau invites the audience to hear the words detached from all the emotions most of us connect with Breivik's body. When the text is given a chance to come into existence detached from him as an individual or a character, we are able to hear the words on a more structural level free from psychological interpretations. Then the text speaks more into our political, social, and organisational structures. If we see the text in a performance like this as a thing (text-thing) or material, it will according to object oriented philosophy, always have a side that withdraws from perception. When the text is aesthetically allowed to come into existence (through speech) with its own agency, however entangled with bodies, spaces and other things, it will carry something unknown with it. This I believe to be true not only with stories from real life events, but also with poetry, dramatic text, or any other kind of text that is spoken and performed. As Timothy Morton might say: the withdrawn side of things points to how what we perceive as real is also filled with magic and things that are beyond our reach.

Withdrawn doesn't mean hard to find or even impossible to find yet still capable of being visualized or mapped or plotted. Withdrawn doesn't mean spatially, or materially or temporally hidden yet capable of being found, if only in theory. Withdrawn means beyond any kind of access, any kind of perception or map or plot or test or extrapolation.³²

Tenderness

When staging documentary texts as an ethical practice, I am interested in the concept of *tenderness* that Silvia Benso introduces. Her concept offers an inspiration to how to respond to the ethical call of things through touch. To her, touch is a form of encounter and relation that does not try to understand or grasp the reality of things. Rather it is a sensuous way of relating that lets things be what they are in the moment without the attempt of capturing or framing it into an intelligible image. Benso refers both to Heidegger and Aristoteles and how

³² Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, 54.

they both emphasised touch as the primary way to encounter the world.³³ Benso is interested in the direct meeting between matter (bodies) that does not go via a mediating object (eye, ear, interpretative thinking). It is through the mediating object (interpretation), she argues, that abuse, violence and ontological imperialism arises. She writes that touch is to be vulnerably mortal, which means to be in an ethical relation. Touch is always individual and concrete – never abstract nor universal. Touch is an intimate engagement into things' unique quality. You can never become one through tactile touch because touch reminds me of my mortality that stretches across the void between me and the other.

What is touched remains compellingly exterior, so that touch is a contact without possession, without belonging in difference. It remains as approach, a nearing, a contact without possibility for satisfaction and rest. Nonmediated, pervasive, vulnerable, touch constitutes for mortals the possibility to enter that place of an encounter with things that takes the name of an ethics of things.³⁴

Thinking of Benso's concept in relation to performing text, I have found that a text is touched through the activation of breath, vocal cords, tongue and lips. Speaking is a way to touch words. However, there are different ways of touching a text or anything else. The aesthetics as much as the ethics is formed by our intentions, our aspirations, and our conceptualisations of what our material is and how we understand our relation to it. The problem is that touch often becomes a grasping after something specific, or a gesture to satisfy the need to control and understand something. Benso stresses that for touch to be the ethical encounter with the other, we need to work with patience, humility and listening. We need to give time to be touched, moved and affected by what we touch. The deceit of touch happens when touch forgets its vulnerability and neglects to relate through a deep listening. It is an attention that waits for the other to make a move, a patience that does not know what it is waiting for. It is not about giving anything meaning but to stay with and spend time with it. Tenderness is a concept that deals with violence by exhausting it through time. In her article³⁵ Böhnisch points to the way the text is performed by actress Sascha Ö. Soydan in *Breiviks Erklring*: how the staging provides time for us all to listen and lets the text touch us in different ways without overloading the performance with too many other aesthetic effects. Soydan offers a way of speaking that has not defined an interpretation, but which explores the text-thing through touch, with the audience, not knowing exactly what it will reveal.

This text argues that artistic researchers need to interrogate one's orientations, that is, to consider choice of material and its surroundings, connections and relations – the contexts, the histories, the coming into being of the materials dealt with – as an exploration and process of articulating the personal working ethics. This must be done, but not as a scientific

³³ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*, 159.

³⁴ Benso, *The Face of Things : A Different Side of Ethics*, 163.

³⁵ Böhnisch, " gi Breivik en scene?".

search to uncover and gain knowledge – and thus control things – but rather with the consciousness of the limitations of knowledge. My proposal, which is only one of many possible alternatives, suggests respecting the inexhaustible potentiality of any material and accepting that any material has sides that are hidden or withdrawn from perception. I call it an *ethics of the unknown*. To relate to a documentary text, or any other kind of material, as a thing means to care for its unknown aspects. Timothy Morton speaks about the mystery of the real, where he understands the withdrawal of things to be their unspeakable aspects, representing the secrets they carry. In my own artistic work, when I practice dramaturgy, I need to keep asking how I can give space and time for the unknown in each different artistic process. As an ethical act, how can I care for it and not try to uncover and understand everything? The ethics of the unknown seeks to open up other spaces of experience, which includes aspects of magic and wonders in order to create other worlds imaginable. There is never one definite answer, as I see ethics as relational and situation specific. Therefore, I need to keep asking how I can invite audiences to rest with the performer and the material in time and space. How can we together explore what is not possible to articulate or explain, but which can only be experienced as a sensation, a murmur or a light brush of air?

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