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Performance as Device for Disorientation

Jennifer Torrence || with reflections by Simon Løffler

Precariousness is the condition of performance. Every single performer has had the experience of a performance falling apart, or at least an experience that something is dangerously close to the line, where collapse feels imminent. This sense of precarity emerges from a unique blend of an intended artistic idea, the performer's limitations, and countless invisible and unpredictable energetic forces inherent to the performance situation and the particular relation to an audience. Such a cocktail of forces can stir up a lot of momentum, which can ultimately and totally change the intended thrust of the work– occasionally for the better, I will argue (Fischer-Lichte, 2008).

Many musicians try to avoid the vulnerability of the performance situation and to regain a sense of control through a variety of rehearsal techniques, meditation, and even nerve-quelling prescription drugs. Throughout the research conducted in the project Performing Precarity, our team has been asking what it would mean to *not* rely so heavily on techniques for controlling the performance situation. What would happen if we learn "to dance in the pressure storm"?[1] In the text *"Quick Now–"* (2021) I outlined my fascination with disturbances in performance and how they shake the performer into a vital sense of presence, a presence that helps the performer quickly process and navigate such unpredictable thrusts. In *"Soft to the Touch: Performance, Vulnerability, and Entanglement in the Time of Covid"* (2021) I looked at specific works that are built upon physical and energetic co-dependence as a lens through which to reflect upon the unique performance insights brought on by the pandemic, and vice versa.

In this exposition I will take a closer look at the experience of the unplanned, unstructured, and total collapse of a work in performance. I will attempt to look at one such failure I experienced with my collaborator, Simon Løffler, in the realization of his work *Animalia I* (2020-2022), for two performers wearing self-made instruments that

[1] Jannik Sinner in an interview after winning his first tennis Grand Slam, January 2024.

evoke the body mechanics of birds. *Animalia I* underwent multiple revisions, and the exposition contains performances of two versions (2020 and 2022). To supplement reflections on our process with *Animalia I*, the exposition also contains documentation of the work *Animalia II* (2020-2023), for self-made instruments that evoke the body mechanics of butterflies, a work that similarly underwent multiple revisions. I will reflect on the experience of the performance of *Animalia I* through the theories of queer phenomenology and disorientation as expressed by Sara Ahmed, and through aesthetics of collapse as expressed by Jack Halberstam. The performance and trajectory of the work *Animalia I* offers a case of how disorientation and an aesthetic of collapse can open out into an (un)becoming together and ways of living otherwise.

> *By many standards, the performance found in the video below could be seen as a complete failure. The instruments basically disintegrate as the performers try to carry on. The performers are forced to stop multiple times. The audience is in fits of unwanted laughter. And yet, this performance of collapse seems to open up totally new possibilities.*

Animalia I (2019-2020), performed by Jennifer Torrence and Simon Løffler.
KM28, Worst Behavior, Berlin, January 2020.
Video available in the exposition at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2191489/2191490

A conversation on the collapse of *Animalia I*, Simon Løffler and Jennifer Torrence

This conversation has been edited for readability. The conversation took place in Oslo on 14 September, 2023.

Jennifer Torrence: We've been talking for three years about a performance we had in Berlin right before Covid, where we played a piece of yours called Animalia I, for two performers each wearing homemade instruments involving a bird beak and some finger cymbals attached near our ears. In this piece we play each other's "head outfits" in a kind of entangled duet. The piece was written as a very virtuosic, rhythmic, repetitive, strict, and rigorous piece. But at the premiere in Berlin, and very early in our performance, it was like our instruments started to disintegrate and break. Especially my instrument. I had a little cymbal on my beak that fell off again and again, then the cymbals near my ears slipped out of place so you couldn't reach them. As the instruments continued to break, there was no way we could continue with the strictness you intended. It wasn't possible at all. I honestly had no clue how we were going to get to the end, or if we would just have to give up, or stop and repair the instruments and start over. Every time something would break the audience would break out into laughter. They laughed more and more, first at us, and then when we decided that we would not give up no matter what, the room changed and it seemed they were laughing with us as we all observed this totally absurd situation. The room was completely charged, like everyone was on the edge of their seat. The piece was forced to become a kind of slapstick comedy piece rather than the virtuosic duo you had written. After the performance, I remember you being very sad that it happened like this, or disappointed because the performance obviously wasn't what you had envisioned. Some of the audience that we talked to loved it so much they encouraged us to never return to the original version. For me, this whole interaction became the thread of thinking about performance as an opportunity for such disorientation and collapse. Where in rehearsal we work to smooth out such disruptions and unpredictability, but where in performance one has no option but to go into a kind of improvisatory play mode when these moments arise. I wanted to ask how you experienced this and if it has changed your work at all in the aftermath.

Simon Løffler: Yeah, it very much has. But you know, I think it's important to go back a step before this piece. I first met you in Denmark when you were part of Speak Percussion, and we did a workshop which I have a very vivid memory of. For instance, after writing a sketch for this piece (or it was actually kind of a finished score or something) and the way that you reacted to it was quite inspirational. Some of the things I thought were very, very difficult you were kind of joking about, like "Oh, I like these septuplets". This was nothing for you. And there was some kind of discussion, a conflict I guess, between the ensemble and me because I didn't want it to be performed. I didn't feel it was finished and they wanted to perform it in Sweden right after that workshop. I said, "It's not finished" and you sided with me, "If it's not finished, we don't do it". And then coming back to work with you quite some years later, I guess I had this feeling that there was more space for experimentation. I felt like you embodied a different kind of virtuosity where it's not just about making it successfully, but also that you can embody it so much that you can play around with it and change it continuously, right? So I felt there was much more of an open space for experimentation. That's for me the most fruitful starting point. And regardless of the fact that it's complicated to notate, it is also just this thing that you get into and you can let it change, right? Maybe you can comment if I'm correct or not, but I felt like we had this in common. We took delight in trying to find the border or boundary that can be pushed a little bit.

I don't perform as much as you do. I want to perform, but it's not something that I do as much as you. So, you know, putting myself in a position to memorize and play these different things was kind of a push. I don't know if it was so for you. And then we had this long workshop, several hours, maybe we had two or something, where all the material was fit to our physicality and so we knew what we had. And it kind of adapted to us as bodies. And then, for me, writing the score was like, okay, maybe this or that can work, but not in the sense that these decisions are the final take on the piece. I wasn't so focused on making instruments that were “Kolberg-Percussion-stable-ish”, it just didn't really fit the process. So I never really got around to making instruments that can hold over time, and coincidentally, they really broke in the performance. In the concert what was ultimately an enlightening experience for me was that we could pull the piece through regardless of what happened. And I realized, as you said yourself, that I think that is what the piece became: having to adapt to a vision of it in real time. We

have a video of the dress rehearsal and I don't really like that performance. It's too strict. It's too like, we just do it, you know? So I think of this breaking down...

I don't know, there are many angles from which to see it. First of all, you could see the breakdown as a saving element. It saves the music because the music doesn't hold. Maybe so. So it changed the piece completely. But you could also see the breakdown as an element of instability that we managed to adapt to in the concert. And I think it was largely you that pulled that through, you kept in the role and then I followed, right? The concept of… let's call it the unstable or let's call it the vulnerable or something; it's very interesting because it's different from generation to generation, as I see it. I definitely come from the tradition of exposing difficulty, but not necessarily not succeeding. It's like the overcoming of difficulty. I got very interested in pushing that further, to the point of not necessarily succeeding. Right, but still exposing what it could perhaps be if you succeeded. It's still in the mode of playing something that's difficult and adapting to that, but there's also instability and there's perhaps the impossibility of whatever you're trying to do. In the generation following me, as I see it, vulnerability is about being who you are, as truly as you can be on stage. I have this colleague, Alexandra Hallén in Denmark, who made a piece where she is half naked on stage and she is caressed with ice cubes on her skin.[2] She reacts, she shivers and such. And I think as far as I'm able to conceive, she's really there on stage as herself, exposing her physical reaction to an outside stimulus. It's about being who you are and exposing yourself in a vulnerable position. Whereas vulnerability for me is still slightly more old fashioned. It's about trying to make it. The effort, you know? And I'm very interested in how I can bridge to a new conception of fragility, vulnerability, instability and such. And I think our performance might be kind of a bridge.

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hB3d3yzDxo

Disorient

> "If we know where we are when we turn this way or that way, then we are oriented. We have our bearings. We know what to do to get to this place or that place. To be oriented is also to be turned towards certain objects, those that help us find our way…When we are oriented, we might not even notice we are oriented: we might not even think "to think" about this point…After all, concepts often reveal themselves as things to think "with" when they fail to be translated into being or action." (Ahmed, 2006, p 1 - 6)

Sara Ahmed's highly influential book *Queer Phenomenology, Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) takes on phenomenological discourse with a queer bent, suggesting that queerness disorders and disrupts the spatial patterns of accepted relations and directionality. If bodies and identities are formed through a phenomenological orientation towards particular objects and spaces, towards a sense of "home", then a queer phenomenology is one that would continually undo such orientation. As Ahmed puts it, "...a queer phenomenology would function *as a disorientation device*; it would not overcome "the disalignment" of the horizontal and the vertical axes, allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world" (ibid. p 172, italics added for emphasis).

In terms of performance, what would it mean to dwell in moments of disorientation and deliberately seek to *not* overcome "the disalignment"? Following Fischer-Lichte we know that performance contains unique energetic forces that can send the performer into totally uncharted phenomenological spaces with unexpected objects and others. These unplanned or unforeseen paths that open have the potential to fundamentally unravel and remake the relations a performer has with her own horizontal and vertical axes, and with those she finds herself alongside in this oblique zone. If one truly allows such an undoing to occur, if one truly refrains from deliberate realignment, nothing less than the work itself, and one's sense of self within it, is at stake. If the performer can "allow the moments of disorientation to gather", they can become something to "think with", perhaps opening up another angle on the world, perhaps suggesting ways of living and performing otherwise (ibid, p. 24).

Situations of disorientation are unique in performance versus that of rehearsal. Rehearsal is conventionally a space intended for exploration and decision making, a space for smoothing out bumps and achieving fluency. Performance does not allow such careful consideration or measurement, for planning or habitualization. Performance is where glitches are produced and exposed, where they become material. It is a potential space for the emergence of an impasse, for that thick present

marked by non-knowing and non-movement. Performance could even be considered a *device for disorientation.* This is especially so for the performer, whose history of preparation can suddenly become discombobulated in the pressure-storm, but it is also a possible experience for the audience, whose previous knowledge of the work or the performer can become unsettled, or because the social construction of live performance itself undergoes a re-ordering.

With its disorganization of vertical and horizontal axes, disorientation displaces known trajectories in favor of the stubborn and hyperreal zone of the present. Ahmed describes the experience of time: "One moment does not follow another, as a sequence of spatial givens that unfolds as moments of time. They are moments in which you lose one perspective, but the ''loss'' itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence" (ibid,, pg. 158). Disorientation destroys senses of direction, and with that myths of progress and mastery, and instead leaves the performer with only the *here and now*. Disorientation produces a vital presence built of alertness, sensitization, and responsiveness. There is no option for auto-pilot or a habitualized order of things. Such disorientation is fascinating in its potential to open up a "terrain for transformative encounter", as Anna Tsing puts it when discussing the disturbance of landscape and the emergence of life in the form of the matsutake mushroom (Tsing, 2017, pg 160). Disorientation can be the staging of such encounters, suggesting that "indeterminacy also makes life possible" (ibid, pg. 20).

The experience of disorientation and disturbance can be terrible too. I must admit my own ambivalence to their occurrences. In the heat of live performance it can be a truly terrible experience, especially due its very sudden emergence in combination with an often prolonged sensation of immobility. Phenomenologist Maurice Merlau-Ponty describes experiences of disorientation as causing "the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us" (Merleau Ponty, 2002, pg. 269). Anna Tsing reminds us that judging how bearable a disturbance is is a matter of perspective, and it is only from mine that I can speak with any real authority. But it is in this experience of our own contingency, and the horror that it fills us with, this place of "vital ambivalence" (Singh, 2017), where one can experience both the giddiness and the nausea, the horror and the thrill, that might lead to living and performing otherwise.

After the original Berlin performance, Løffler decided to recompose his work Animalia I, but this time with the vision of it being performed by me and my partner, Inga Margrete Aas, thus opening up the work to a particular dynamic of intimacy and deep listening.

Animalia I (2022), performed by Jennifer Torrence and Inga Margrete Aas.
Ultima Festival for Contemporary Music, Oslo, September 2022.
Video available in the exposition at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2191489/2191490

Jennifer Torrence: It leads me to the latest version of the "bird duo", which Inga Margrete Aas and I performed together. How do you think about this new version, especially in light of the roots of this fated Berlin performance? Because for me there are a few things that are very interesting and unique in this new version of the piece. One is to perform with my partner in a work where an element of affection is fundamental to the material. It is very natural to do this with Inga, obviously, but this state of affection was also something that I experienced in Berlin with you when the piece fell apart. At the end of the original version of the bird piece, I don't know if you remember this, there is this heart instrument that sounds like "waka, waka, waka waka", and as we played it we turned

our heads towards each other and our beaks touched. And in Berlin we had come through some very unforeseen circumstances, and in such a playful way, so that when we finally came to this point in the piece where we felt we were back in control and we knew where the other person was, I also had a different experience of you. I experienced you differently on stage, it was a kind of tender connection. And so to have this new version of the bird piece where affection is the core experience is interesting. I wonder if you connect this material development in this way or not. The other thing that I find really interesting in the new bird piece is how it seems that you have built in disorientation as a method and material. We perform this version of the piece by making small phrases by rubbing on each other's beak, but in this piece we play with our eyes closed almost the entire time. The piece has seven phrases and at the beginning of each phrase, our beaks are not touching and we have our eyes closed. To start each phrase, we have to search for each other's beak, touch them, and then perform a choreography of caresses and nudges. I'm interested in this moment of turning to find the other person. That the other person happens to be my partner means there is already a lot of familiarity and subtle communication happening—but still in this moment of turning, this gesture of turning towards her without seeing her...It's very hard to explain. I basically see it as a situation of non-knowing and trust, where every phrase is a moment of disorientation and a leap towards the other. And then there's the moment of reorientation, "Ah, there she is", which is always full of relief for me. And then we do the phrase of affection before we then have to turn away from each other again. There is also something about the repetition of this gesture that makes me think back to the repeated collapses and restarts in Berlin.

Simon Løffler: First of all this version is extremely influenced by you two and made for you and from my conception of you as people. So, there's this tenderness; you both have it. And this sign, or gesture, of touching becomes very very deep in a way, like how to just reach out and touch, you know. And so, weirdly enough, I take myself out of the piece, put Inga there instead and everything changes. When I was in the piece, all these signs, like the eyes that I wanted to make stiff and the heartbeat and the beaks touching, that was really affection. But I instrumentalized them, probably because of where I was. But also you: we didn't know each other well and, you know, just so many things. But Inga comes into the picture and it's just a whole new beginning. So that's one thing. The question of whether there's a red thread from the first version to this

version: I definitely think that this moment where things collapse in our Berlin performance is there now, but kind of made more systematic because you have your eyes permanently closed and every time you have to reach out and find each other's beaks, there is this chance that it goes wrong. And also you have to do different gestures, beak on beak, and sometimes you make it, but sometimes it's just not possible because you don't know where each other are, you know? And I don't think you can drill that. This was important, and it went into the version somehow.

Can I say one more thing? It sounds stupid as a human being saying this, but I was really interested in watching animals and I was really interested in the sensitivity that you can achieve with the basic aspects of the body, like the heartbeat and the beak and the eyes and wings and so on. At first I was really trying to find a way to make music with it, but after a while (and after Inga came into the duet and it became your piece), it dawned on me, and not until then, that this was about making the body affectionate while playing music. And I think the trajectory of the bird piece made me realize that. Playing music together can be more than playing instruments alongside each other. It can be sensitizing your body towards and on and with each other, you know. I'm still very interested in that. And I couldn't do that if it had been you and me, but it somehow made sense with you and Inga.

Jennifer Torrence: That's also how I experience it. That's why the performance in Berlin is so important for me, because it actually shows me that performance is, ideally, a process of sensitizing. And sometimes this manifests as affection. Very often I feel that these moments reveal an intimacy that one could call affection or trust. And this, for me, is the ideal. It's why I go on stage. In search of this thing that is a spiritual space of connection and playful response. And I don't think it's possible in rehearsal. It happens. We can have these special and deep moments in rehearsal, but there's something about the ritual of the concert which allows this heightened sensitizing to emerge.

Simon Løffler: Yes, it's very interesting. I'm not sure it's about improvisation as such. I think there's a great deal of preparation that has to go into making that moment, to find this porous space, you know, where something emerges. But you're still there and you still know what to do. I don't think it's a John Cage kind of idiom of aleatoric events. All respect to him, but all the time we invested in trying to make the first

version, that work, had to be done for the present version of the piece to have been possible.

Collapse

And then there are the performances that actually collapse. Not just the ones where the performer momentarily loses footing, but ones where they actually fall on their proverbial face. These performances are terribly painful to undergo, both as a spectator and as a performer. They betray the illusion of theater and they unmask dreams of virtuosic revelation. But at the same time, in their radical undoing, such performances have the potential to reveal those ways of living otherwise by positioning our vulnerability in the foreground.

In a time marked by collapsing democracies, ecosystems, health systems, and economies, it may seem ill fitting to glorify the crisis that is a performance falling apart. However, scholars such as Donna Haraway suggest that for survival we must learn to not only live, but also to die well with and for each other (Haraway, 2016, pg. 1). Haraway's project suggests a radical sense of co-presence that means undoing narratives of heroes and rather to reckon with a necessary and irreversible condition of mutual decay. Jack Halberstam's latest project on the wild has been invested in collapse as a method for undoing the world. He proposes the notion of an aesthetics of collapse and calls for an unbuilding of the world, a call that is nothing short of abolition. He argues that we abstain from rebuilding and repair, and instead let the ruins continue to crumble. He writes, "The aesthetic of collapse feels all too relevant in these end days of the plague and ruination…While capitalism is an ongoing fantasy of more excess, profit, and surplus, it necessarily must be punctuated by less and loss, debt and deficit…But the fall is always calculated in to the rise and never actually results in the destruction of the system…It falls to art, the aesthetic, to imagine the unbuilding of the world" (Halberstam, 2021, pg. 161).

In his essay "Silence, Stillness, Collapse", Halberstam defines the term "collapse" thus:

> "The term "collapse" derives from Latin and contains "col" meaning "together" and "labi" meaning slip. This etymology offers a glimpse of the potential aesthetic folds hidden in the term. Collapse can refer to a system plagued by multiple failures, a mental break, a physical depletion, a structure giving way, a fall…A collapsing aesthetic or an aesthetics of collapse might name a series of gestures that orient toward falling, that skew away from making, building,

> improving, and embrace the beauty of gradual and inevitable decay." (ibid, pg. 163)

Halberstam's definition of collapse and its potential aesthetics, much like Ahmed's project, suggests a queer phenomenological, embodied condition of relationality. In this essay Halberstam analyzes the artistic output of the queer practices of Alvin Baltrop and his photographs of the 1970's gay cruising sites that were the dilapidated Hudson River Piers, Pauline Oliveros' embrace of noise, and the death drops of voguing. In my own experiences of performances that collapse I also experience an embodied condition of relationality. There is a sensation that the architecture grounding the structure and dramaturgy of the piece give way, leaving the performer in a heightened situation of improvisatory play and constant reassessment. The disorder makes space for surprising assemblages, potentially making the relations that bind the work and its reception more explicitly mutual.

In the collapse of a performance, which is also the performer's own collapse and their own dispossession, we turn towards objects and others as we reach for reorientation. This gesture of reaching out is the choreography of our collapse (literally our falling together), suggesting an ethics of relationality and radical co-presence. As the drama of the performance's corrupted fluency unfolds, the performer turns towards objects and others in search of a recalibrated sense of collective direction. It is in this collectivity born of turning towards each other, with the simultaneous gravitational drop that is our fundamental undoing, that uncharted paths of collective (un)becoming can emerge for the work, the performers, and even the audience.

> **Jennifer Torrence:** Thanks for saying that because that's actually the last thing I wanted to ask about. Today we are rehearsing the piece *Animalia II*, for two performers with butterfly wings, which has also gone through several forms. I think we're now dealing with at least the third or even the fourth form of the piece. You've performed it yourself with a dancer, and I performed two or three versions with Ellen Ugelvik, and now you and I are performing together again. So it's a nice full circle moment where we can see how far we have come. And I feel that there are a lot of reasons for it. Part of it is friendship and part of it is working with each other for a long time. But I also think that we have some kind of sensibility that means that this butterfly version somehow already has this affection and

precision, playfulness, heaviness, lightness. I find it very exciting, I have to say.

Simon Løffler: I agree. I think this version came into fruition very naturally. Somehow we had these basic building blocks, and then we agreed naturally on how to develop things. I also think it matters a great deal that we played the bird piece a lot together, so we know what it feels like, we know each other's bodies in space or something. Not sure. But there's a kinship I think. I don't know what to even say about it…except for the fact that, very often in these butterfly iterations, I find myself constantly hitting my head against the wall as a composer because when I look at it on paper I feel like it needs more, more elements. And then when we go into it together as performers I realize, no, it does not need new elements. It just needs the nuances of commonality, of common understanding and listening. That's a very interesting thing. I experienced that every time in the butterfly piece that, no, it wasn't about finding this new thing. It's about somehow finding each other in what we do.

Animalia II (version 2023). Performed by Simon Løffler and Jennifer Torrence.
Warsaw Autumn, Warsaw, September 2023.
Video available in the exposition at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2191489/2191490

Finding each other: Towards living (and performing) otherwise

Animalia I and the trajectory of its tender utterances have taught me about the emergence of collectivity amidst a dispossession born of disorientation and collapse in performance. The collapse is named and unfolds in our gesture of reaching out, the gesture of turning towards the world in order to find bearings once lost. This turning towards unexpected objects and others, both human and more-than-human, this choreography of collapse, suggests nothing less than a non-individualist subjectivity, one that is *of* relations, *of* mutual vulnerability.[3] The collapse in performance, exactly the utter failure of it, potentially opens up for an ethics that moves beyond mastery and its undoing—including notions of mastery as a sense of control over external materials and other beings, as well as control over one's self—and suggests instead an ethics that resonates of "consent not to be a single being" (Fred Moten).

This movement towards a redefinition of subjectivity also reflects the thinking of Gabriel Giorgi where he describes precarity not as a short term crisis, "not only an instance of deprivation and vulnerability but also a threshold in which the very assumptions about what a subject is should be reinvented and recreated" (2013). Through this question of precarity there is a "redefinition of the understanding of "individuality" and its distinction from the collective, the social, or the common" (ibid). In a search for ways to live otherwise, such works and performances as those of *Animalia I* reveal a threshold through which a certain collectivity might manifest in and through performance itself. They suggest a value in continuing to dare to perform, even if—and perhaps especially if—performing means losing our orientation, feeling our dispossession, and in our instinctual grasping for stability keep turning towards each other, in a falling together that might redefine our understandings of individuality and the collective.

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[3] This language of being of relations rather than in relations references the text by Shawn Wilson, Research is Ceremony, Indigenous Research Methods (2008).

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