Helsinki, September 24th 2021
Kankaanpää, September 29th, 2021
Helsinki, October 2nd, 2021

Dear readers,

I rejoice from my whole heart, that we are here, to incorrectly paraphrase Mozart, with whose words Linda opened the conference yesterday. I sit here writing, in the kitchen on Saturday morning at 8.30am. My daughter is playing on the floor, discussing with some stuffed animals as I type and and as I strech my attention towards the future, towards this moment of reading the letter, towards the event of reading it and the uncertainties, precarities present in it. I do rejoice, sincerely, but there is also a tension, a charge created by the distance between the act of writing and the event of reading, and those involved. I project my joy towards the future, towards this moment, towards my supposed joy at the moment of reading. Thus this reading too may perform as a "fabricated environment", to borrow a term used by Madison in her presentation.

So, "letter as a performance" is the title, right? Hmmm. Are we gonna learn how any letter functions as a performance? Or how a letter might become a performance? Or is the title a promise of a theoretical account on the performativity of letters?

I am afraid not. What is at stake here is something smaller, something more modest. It is a story of one research project, in which an artist (yours truly) sets to learn something about the audience and ends up writing letters to them. In this story the letter becomes a tool used in artistic research, it becomes a medium of performance and a way to reach out to the audience and propose a shared process of thinking. And if in this story the letter is a performance, reading the letter is its event.

And by the way, as a practical note – it is good for receiving this presentation to both hear my voice and read from the screen.

As I suppose I have not met any of you, except for Elina (thanks for directing me to this conference, btw), I feel I need to say something about myself first.

I have been working with the so called performing arts since early 2000's. My special interest and more spot has been the audience and its limitations -- in my artistic practice I have been questioning and experimenting on forms of spectatorship in multiple ways.

After some ten years on the field something happened. Or maybe the thing was that something did not happen anymore. I met a dead end, ran out of fuel, or whatever might be the appropriate metaphor. My work had lost its meaning and I considered leaving art altogether. At a moment of disbelief, I made a poll and sent it by email to 30 of my colleagues, asking whether I should

a) continue making art
b) not continue
c) other

Artists often like the odd choice, so most answered c (other). Many answered a (continue with art). One b (do not continue).

So, maybe my choice in the end was c, as I applied for doctoral studies in the Theatre Academy of Uniarts Helsinki and got accepted. I entered the academic register four years ago.

(Also, I started a family with the one who answered b.)

In my doctorate I started to focus in a more straightforward way on the audience as a philosophical problem, a problem present in the practice of making performances. I started to entertain myself with the research question:

"what is (an) audience?"

This question, articulated on the field of artistic research, posited a serious problem: how to research the audience ARTISTICLY. The artists DO something ACTIVELY on STAGE (be it a concrete, virtual or metaphorical one). By contrast, the audience postpones their activity to witness these stage events from the auditorium. At least that is kind of a default structure.

So how could I continue doing art, and yet stay in the audience position? This was a true dilemma.

I started to practice. Meaning, I started to expose my research question in professional occasions. I made it my guideline to each time find a way to present my research *artisticly*, as a performance of sorts, tying the format of presentation and its aesthetics into its content.

Through this challenge, a solution to my problem slowly surfaced. I would not create anything on stage, and I would not remain passive in the audience either. Instead, I would slip something ***in between***.

Something thin, like a lens,

through which the stage would remain visible, in which the audience itself would be reflected and on which I could write.

So there I was, instead of performing on stage, instead of audiencing from the auditorium, I was writing. I was creating performative events in the form of text, as events of reading.

In between the stage and the auditorium, was the letter. My letters to the audience.

In a performance event, the audience is an ambiguous and charged entity. It is both a plural and a singular. It is both submissive and dominant. It is by default anonymous, and yet composed of specific individuals with their individual experiences. In Finnish the word for audience, "yleisö", invented on the 19th century by the activist and pedagogue Volmari Kilpinen, means originally "people in general".

I wanted to address this entity at the same time as one and as many. As anonymous and as personalities. As something both alien and familiar. This became possible as I addressed them via letters. Let me take an example.

Helsinki, 14th of November 2018. We are at Cirko, the Center for New Circus, at A Kilo of Art -seminar, arranged as a part of the program of the Baltic Circle International Theatre Festival.

When entering the seminar, each participant receives an envelope. In it they read their own name and the sentence:

"open at 2.10pm, at the same time with the others"

They take the envelope and place it between their journal, slip it into their bag or lay it on top of their laptop. The seminar begins.

As the time proposed by the envelope draws near, the audience becomes restless. The curator of the festival, Satu Herrala, takes initiative and speaks aloud, suggesting that "soon we should open the envelope... it is quite exciting...". Then it is 2.10pm and the participants start to rip them open and take out the letters.

As customary, it starts with a date in the upper left-hand corner of the first paper. Then there is a parenthesees in red, mimicing a manuscript of a theatre play, and in it the parts, which are not intended to be read aloud:

[There are few dozens of people at Cirko, with papers in their hands, gazes directed towards the papers]

Then the letter addresses the reader by their name:

"Dear ...

I am glad that you are here, and reading this. I dare to approach you in this personal way even though we haven't met."

I had asked the organizers to send me the list of registered participants in advance. Some of them I knew from before. In that case I would start the letter by refering our shared history, like where we had last met or what I remember about them or what I felt was meaningful in our relationship. The participants whom I did not know, I looked up in the internet. I checked out what they worked with, if they had published something or if there was something else I could relate with. I commented these materials in my letters and quoted their own words if possible.

While each of the letters contained this intimate, personal relationship between the reader and the writer, they also had a shared rhythm, which paced the event of reading and enabled the emergence of an audience.

This rhythm began with the instruction in the envelope, to open them simultaneously. It continued with the parenthesees, which would script the event, offer instructions to the participants, like

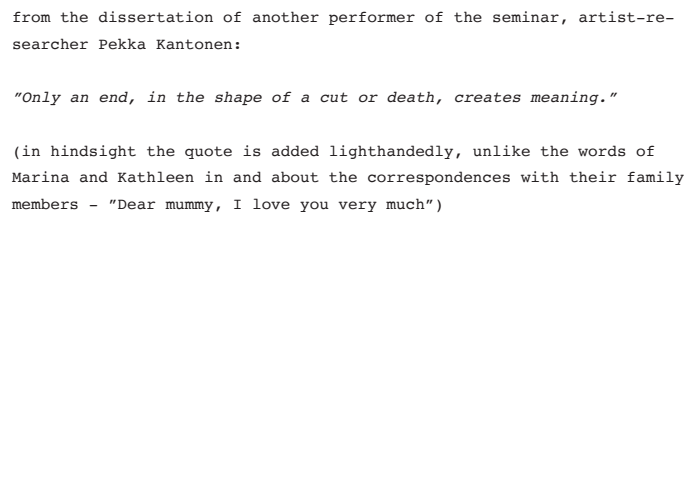
[The readers breathe. Some of the glance around]

or

[The readers ponder, evaluate, change position. One is enthusiastic, one bored, one hurries past the parenthesis. The mental states of the rest are hard to figure out. But there is some sort of subtle, barely perceptible energy or presence in the room.]

[Tuomas is still silent and the participants of the Epistolary Research Network Conference read the parentheses from the screen]

Each page ended with a parentheses, which instructed the readers to take a break in reading and continue to the next page at the same time with the others.



The performance was four pages long. The last page ended with a quote from the dissertation of another performer of the seminar, artist-researcher Pekka Kantonen:

"Only an end, in the shape of a cut or death, creates meaning."

(in hindsight the quote is added lighthandedly, unlike the words of Marina and Kathleen in and about the correspondences with their family members – "Dear mummy, I love you very much")

[pause]

Since early 2018, I have realized about 17 seperate events, depending on the method of counting, and within those events maybe around 150 different texts.

Some of them would be letters in envelopes. Some just folded papers, that would still address the readers like a letter. Some booklets, some manuscripts. Sometimes there would be just one text, a copy of which everyone would have. Sometimes there would be several, out of which each audience member would have to choose. Sometimes they would be addressed individually like at the Baltic Circle. Some would take place in events of artistic research. Some in art festivals. Some in pedagogical situations. Some in reading circles. Some in theatres, some in studios, some in pavillions, some in classrooms, some online. Some of them would be in English, most of them both in Finnish and English and one also in Arabic. Sometimes I would invite people to a performance made by someone else and surround this event with my textual lens.

[Tuomas is approaching the end, in order to create meaning. The kitchen is silent. The kitchen is in the past. The reading takes place in multiple locations, across continents, overseas.]

So, the letter. Letter as a performance. Actually, let's change the title, it is too settled, affirmative, like a statement. It could be rather

"An epistolary performance practice"

How about that?

Otherwise, I feel incomplete. I would like to end with something thoughtful, to be able to derive or crystallize a conclusion. But it has nor yet arrived, I am still here, on the level of re-iterating my experiment, re-experimenting with my practice.

As that practice is one of drafting audiences, of thinking through them and their singularities, I would like to end with some words from the past two days, words which resonate with this epistolary performance practice of mine, the words of

Kathryn:

"a discursive world created in the dialogical field of the letter"

or Reetta:

"the illusion of the presence of the other"

and

"anxieties regarding the epistolary pact"

(...or maybe in this case, regarding the performative pact?)

or Carol:

"coexisting in two places at once"

or Cheryl:

"Who is your audience?"

Yours
Tuomas

[end]