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# Theatre Between Performance and Installation

## Three Contemporary Belgian Examples

Christophe Van Gerrewey

*Wenn heute viele sensible Menschen ihre Aversion gegen das Theater damit begründen, dass ihnen dort zuviel vorgelogen wird, so liegt das Recht dazu nicht in seinem Zuwenig, sondern in seinem Zuviel an Wirklichkeit.*

*Denn der Schauspieler überzeugt uns nur, indem er innerhalb der künstlerischen Logik verbleibt, nicht aber durch Hineinnehmen von Wirklichkeitsmomenten, die einer ganz anderen Logik folgen.*

Georg Simmel, 'Der Schauspieler und die Wirklichkeit' (1912: 5)

In the age of mechanical and especially digital reproduction, the factual and material presence of the artwork is very relative. It is no longer truly necessary to be close to the real work in order to study it, interpret it or aesthetically appreciate it. Every act of theatre seems to form an exception to this instance. Of course, the theatrical performance can be reproduced in film (or in words or images), but everyone will agree that watching these documents will never be a true match to the experience of sitting in the theatre. Exactly this architectural domain of the theatre is of importance here, even more so than the formal characteristics of the medium of the theatre.

The importance of the place where the artwork is revealed and for which it is made can be shown by comparing the theatre with its two derivatives: the installation and the performance. Both installation and performance art have nothing to do with the theatre. They are made for, and in reaction to, the museum. The inevitably spatial installation 'installs' a space in a space: it establishes and settles itself as a new space in the already existing space of the museum. Even when the installation is made for the public space, and not for the museum as an enclosed building *in stricto sensu*, the installation reproduces a much smaller version of the already existing – and nowadays nearly global – sphere of art. The same goes for the performance: an artist decides to make a work of art with his own body. He or she moves and behaves temporarily as a 'normal' person could move. But the artist is not a normal person, since he or she works inside the museum – or rather, the Museum, understood as the art world. A performance is more than an everyday set of peculiar movements, however, precisely because of the Museum context. Understood in this sense, the museum is the eye that watches the artist as he or she produces or moves – the museum is the basic tool that starts every form of mechan-

ical or digital reproduction. The performance and the installation are made with only this initial public in mind: the museum itself, the invisible camera that is the institutional art world. The old esoteric riddle concerning the twig that is breaking somewhere deep in the woods without anyone hearing it does not exist in the sphere of the visual arts. When a twig breaks without anyone hearing it, it might as well have never happened and the twig might as well have never existed. But when an installation is made or a performance is enacted without anyone witnessing it, the installation or the performance is still seen by the eye of Art. The institutional and spatial context in which the installation and the performance come into being ensures their birth, existence and survival. The museum, after all, is – historically seen – a place of conservation and documentation. The museum exists so that things do not get lost, independent of their audience or their actual importance. Indeed, in the archives of many museums, works of art (or other artefacts) do exist that no living person has ever seen or will ever see. That is why the installation and the performance are somewhat violent obligations to the museum to do its conservatory work. In these cases, the museum does not select (by way of the conservator or the curator) something from the outside world in order to preserve it, but someone comes from this outside world and steps into the museum, sometimes even without being invited, in order to be preserved.

The theatre does not have such an auto-conservatory impulse. The theatre does not have a ‘real’ and ‘spatial’ warehouse and, as such, it works completely without an archive. Even more so: what truly defines the theatre and distinguishes it from all other art forms is that it can never create its own documentation or archive. Of all the art forms, it has succeeded the worst in adapting to the laws of mechanical or historical reproduction. The theatre has no material history, since the theatre building and the theatrical tradition are, historically speaking, not historiographic inventions. The theatre is indeed like the twig that breaks deep inside the forest: if there is no audience to hear and watch it, it might as well have never existed.

Many art forms and many artists have shown themselves to be jealous of this unique feature of the theatrical medium. In this sense, the installation and the performance are both somewhat desperate attempts to distort the actions of the imperturbable museum by injecting it with life that does not immediately become an image. But in reverse, in various contemporary theatrical productions, this particular characteristic of actions taking place on stage in front of a seated audience is mingled with practices that originate clearly from inside the museum. This has, of course, been the case ever since the birth of the museum and of modern art, but when the individual arts change, so do their mutual influence. It is, however, too easy to simply invert the argument here by stating that the theatre wants to receive from the museum, as if both are playing the card game of happy families, a sense of history and storage. The theatre cannot and does not want to prevent that everything that happens inside of its boundaries immediately disappears forever. There is more at stake when installation and performance techniques are set in a traditional theatrical constellation. Three contemporary Belgian productions – *Viewmaster* by Heike Langsdorf, Ula Sickel and Laurent Liefvooghe (2007-2010), *End* by

Kris Verdonck (2008) and *You are here* by Deepblue (2008) – can enlighten this specific and intriguing case of mutating media and artistic codes and conventions.

*You are here* by Deepblue is, just like *Viewmaster* and *End* (to some degree), a theatrical performance – that is to say, it maintains the emphasis on a short time duration that the classic theatre play installs, and it takes place inside a certain theatre architecture. There is a stage, and then in front of the stage there is a seated audience that cannot or should not move during the play – say between 8:00 and 9:15 pm. *You are here*, however, starts in a back-to-front way. The theatre space is decorated with curtains in such a way that the audience first has to walk behind the scene. There the spectators, standing, have to wait and see what happens. Their perspective resembles a three-dimensional version of the old PacMan computer game: on the floor lies a grid of 31 x 25 batches of white A4 papers. On about ten fields in the grid, small towers of varying height are erected, built with something that resembles, from a distance, bricks. At first, the scene is empty: the two performers, a man and a woman, are busy between the rows of seats. They are stretching red thread over the chairs at both ends of each row – probably because these chairs do not offer the correct and desired perspective on the narrow stage. Meanwhile, an electronic sighing sound fills the room. Now and then, under the ceiling of the stage, a small red lamp brightens.

Then the two performers finally set foot on the stage. Heine Røsdal Avdal and Mette Edvardsen are both dressed in a white polo shirt, blue jeans and white sneakers. They start clearing a path, again not unlike PacMan, through the white grid of papers. They pick up, seemingly independent of each other, batches of paper so that holes appear in the grid. The teleology of PacMan – eat everything as soon as possible, in a race against the clock, until the screen is empty – does not apply here: sometimes the grid is repaired, when some papers are laid down elsewhere. The clearout has a different purpose: when a path appears, the performers step aside so that the audience can finally walk to its secure seats, carefully in between the rows of papers and the small towers on stage.

Avdal and Edvardsen continue removing or rearranging the papers, and temporarily they uncoil red thread on the stage. The audience can now clearly see that the strange bricks are actually old-fashioned archive boxes. Another thing that now catches the eye is a screen of red LEDs high above the centre of the stage. The ‘system’ that seems to control *You are here* and its performers ‘communicates’ with the audience by means of this screen, but the messages that are transmitted never reveal the true nature of the system. ‘System activated’, the audience reads, or ‘New situation created’, ‘Process information’ and so on. Orders are given, situations are described and difficulties are diagnosed: there is an interface in front of the audience, but it never becomes clear what lies behind it.

During the last part of the performance, the small boxes are handed over, one by one, to the audience by the performers, not without some detours in between the still not entirely removed papers. ‘Pass sideways’, says the screen hanging above the stage. The

first archive boxes, when opened by a 'spectator', show tiny but beautiful and tactile scale models of rather classic scenographic situations: an audience, a stage, some actors or performers. It is as if an image is made of the spatial and conceptual conditions of *You are here* – indeed to show where we are, as the title has it. But later on, quite slowly, the boxes start to show not where we are but where we could be. The audience discovers more and more improbable scenic imaginations: mountain sceneries full of soldiers, a man mowing the lawn, a miniature version of the LED screen, or a man who has already partly left the box: only his legs are still dangling at the side. The 'real' performers, meanwhile, look now and then surprised but concentrated at the audience – and their activities continue. The last boxes hint at a closure of the performance: they show an arrow pointing in the direction of an emergency exit, or a forest of traffic signs. When all the boxes have passed through the hands of the audience, one final box is revealed from behind the scenes. This box is much larger and heavier than all the previous ones. The performers do not hand it over, but keep it in their hands, showing it to every member of the audience. What is now revealed inside the box is the original setting of *You are here*, reduced about twenty times. The papers on the floor of this model prove to be small coupons, good for a free drink in the bar just outside the actual theatre for each visitor. And here yet another representation of the performance is shown on a television screen: with some delay, every spectator can see him- or herself some moments before, right at the moment when the last box was opened before his or her eyes.

With *You are here*, Deepblue has enacted the archival impulse during a theatrical performance. In contemporary art, the cataloguing of art or artefacts has become a valid and regular practice in itself. Mostly in the form of an installation, artists simply show in a pseudo-scientific way a possible approach to a small part of the remnants of the past, be they real or invented. In his essay on the collecting of books, *Unpacking my Library*, Walter Benjamin has rightly stated the memorial aspect of every (personal) collection: 'Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books' (Benjamin 1999: 41). Putting together a pile of objects that one has gathered personally over the years (or, rather, unpacking as Benjamin did and as happens in *You are here*) is indeed a chaotic kind of activity that makes frequent use of several individual memories. In the museum, however, and in an installation inside the museum, the archive or the collection installs a sense of historical time – not the time of an individual, but the time of mankind itself. The archive, the collection and the index are the tools that history uses to establish itself as an identity in the museum by creating the illusion of transparency, chronology and/or completeness.

The theatrical regime is of a different kind. There is no such thing as historical time inside the theatre. The expectations of the audience are totally different, just like the features of the art form – and both are continually preserved by time and space, by the duration of the show and by the architecture of the theatre. During *You are here*, hundreds

of possible stage scenes are shown to the audience, together with the unpacking (during the first parts of the performance) that is necessary to reveal these possibilities. The audience – and this is the important difference with an artistic installation in the museum – has no clue about either the origin of the objects or the working method of the archival system. Are we being shown forgotten ideas of Deepblue, sketches of other possible performances? Is this an homage to previous artists, a case of contemporary but not outspoken referentialism? Or is this an enactment of the total end of history and of art history, and evidence that art can still continue after it is proclaimed dead? We do not know. As said before: the theatre does not work for the sake of collecting history but for the sake of entertaining an audience. That is why, in *You are here*, the introduction of archival impulses or the technique of the installation acquires a comparable status to other narrative elements in a play. When we watch *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, we do not know exactly why Vanya has made such a mess of his life, or why he has allowed himself to get locked up inside this existential deadlock. There is only the chaos of memories, and his memories are not the memories of the audience. The audience can watch and listen, but it will always be confronted with a loss, as it has no contact to the time before the play, before Vanya became unhappy, or – likewise – before the performers of Deepblue or the anonymous master of their performance machine started collecting all these theatrical remnants and scale models. Moreover, there is no time after the play either. When the audience has left *You are here*, it can still watch the television screen, but it will know very well that what it sees is truly over, exactly because the audience has experienced that same thing only moments before. That is why theatre does not leave the audience with empty hands. The audience starts to watch theatre (or every other art form) with empty hands, but the workings of theatrical space and time slowly and magically make the hands of the audience even emptier than they already were. To give meaning to this emptiness is the value of the theatrical experience.

In *You are here*, the magnitude of this valuable loss is reinforced by the initial nearness of the audience to the archive: the spectators are allowed to see the archive at close quarters, from another viewing angle than later on during the performance. The same goes for *Viewmaster*, another example of a theatrical constellation that lingers between the visual regimes of installation and performance. This stage play takes place inside an architectural construction that makes use of the so-called ‘Pepper’s ghost illusion’, a nineteenth-century ‘machine’ that was used on stage to call forth ghosts and phantoms. In order to make this illusion real, the viewer needs to have clear sight of a first room through a large glass partition, without being able to look into a second, adjacent room. These two rooms are separated by another glass partition, slanted in relation to the first. When these two rooms are strategically lit (that is: simultaneously or not simultaneously), the audience sees how a body appears at another spot than where it is actually standing – indeed like a ghost or a phantom. In a certain sense, the Pepper’s ghost illusion is a precursor to cinema: in a movie theatre, we see a body where it is not physically present, but we also see this apparition at another moment in time. The Pep-

per's ghost illusion can only show a body that is actually there at the moment, but only a couple of metres removed from the place where it appears in the eyes of the audience.

*Viewmaster*, performed by Heike Langsdorf and Ula Sickel and designed by architect and artist Laurent Liefoghe, takes place inside such a machine. This whole of adjoining rooms, wooden walls and glass partitions is placed inside a space without a real theatrical infrastructure: there is no stand, and there is no proscenium. That is to say: the Pepper's ghost illusion is the proscenium, and as soon as the performance starts, the audience sits down on the floor or on chairs in front of it. Just like in *You are here*, the viewers are at first allowed to visit the machine while all the lights are still on. By doing so, the artists do not pretend to keep anything back: the trick is exposed, nothing is hidden, and everyone can see for himself what is there. When everyone is seated, the lights go out and the performance starts. First, the theatrical machine presents itself: the separate parts are illuminated separately from inside. Nothing happens that is impossible, and this is thoroughly shown. Then the bodies of the two performers appear. One of them stands in the left room (which is invisible for the audience), left of the slanted glass partition; and the other performer is standing in the space that lies directly in the audience's line of view, behind the slanted glass partition. Depending on the internal lighting of the Pepper's ghost illusion, one body, another body, or two bodies at the same time appear in the perspective of the audience. What we see is now really impossible: it is out of the question that two women are standing on the same spot, or that a woman is standing on a spot where, only one moment later, as the light changes, another woman is standing. The classic postmodern motif of the bi-location, which shows one person simultaneously in two places (one is reminded of many of the movies of David Lynch) is reversed: in this instance, in one place, two people are standing. *Viewmaster* calls into being a specific kind of melancholic wonder: once upon a time, the audience that witnessed this illusion must have really been frightened by what it saw. A contemporary audience, however, is used to these kinds of things. Because we have been able to study the machine beforehand, because we have become somewhat blasé after a century of full-blown visual culture, we almost feel ashamed when we realize we do not feel more – more wonder, more disbelief, more enchantment.

The architecture that is being used in *Viewmaster* reminds one of the installations by visual artist Dan Graham, such as the classic *Square Room Diagonally Divided/Two Audiences* from 1981: a square room divided by a glass wall as a diagonal in two triangular rooms. One triangle has white walls; the other one is covered in mirrors. Two audiences can enter: they look at each other, mirrored and distorted by both glass and mirrors, seeing themselves reflected in the faces and bodies of others. But the real difference between *Viewmaster's* and Graham's approach is more remarkable and lies on a less formal level. That difference is the absence of a chronology: Graham does not install a sequence and does not use a performative track. Inside his installations, there are no lights that flicker. In Graham's pavilions, the visitors have their own freedom of action, and indeed, only their movements guarantee some action. The work of Graham, and the work of the visual arts in general, does not concern itself directly with motivated ac-

tion or co-ordinating time. In *Viewmaster*, however, we witness the presence of an ‘author’ – indeed, a ‘view-master’ – who enforces a regime that creates conditions in space and in time. It has been the dream of many artists to make art that seems to have no author. When, for example, visual artist Ilya Kabakov speaks of the ‘total installation’ (1995: 251-255), he is thinking exactly of this: an artwork that is so ‘total’ that every trace of the author seems to have disappeared. And indeed, artistic installations often do have a ready-made or everyday quality about them, like for example the *Wirtschaftswerte* made by Joseph Beuys in 1980: a collection of shelves, objects and paintings on the wall. It is important to notice that only space and material can obtain an anonymous or authorless status this easily. Nothing can distract the mind as profoundly as architecture does, since the movements of the body are not restricted in any way, and the course of things never becomes fixed. As soon as a specific development of time is introduced, as is the case with theatre, the existence of an author becomes imminent.

In the case of *Viewmaster*, the artistic regime and the auctorial intention execute a montage live and on the spot. *Viewmaster* is a theatrical performance, with a beginning and with an end – and in between, according to convention, the daily aspects of human life are neglected. That is not the case in Graham’s pavilions which stand in the public space: one can, for example, have a fight inside one of these constructions or eat a sandwich or make a phone call.<sup>1</sup>

In *Viewmaster*, after the machine and the performing bodies are properly introduced, a narrative is developed, with fitting, subtle and sometimes even ironic allusions. A lounge cover version of *Come as You Are* by Dani Siciliano is played, originally performed by the rock band Nirvana. Again, this phrase reminds us that no invisible tricks are being played. Slowly, the movements of Langsdorf and Sickel become increasingly frenetic and faster, and the effects of the machine become more intense and explicit. The suspicion arises that something is happening inside of this Pepper’s ghost illusion, something that starts and that ends properly, as real and classic stage plays tend to do. This desire for a story is not entirely fulfilled by *Viewmaster*, but it is put inside an ironic perspective when the performers re-enact scenes from famous movies, from the likes of *Inland Empire* (2006) by David Lynch or *L’année derrière à Marienbad* (1961) by Alain Resnais. The audience can hear the sounds and the dialogues from these movies, but it still sees the bodies of the performers. This explicit reference to (experimental) movie classics tries to historicize the mechanism of *Viewmaster*: the Pepper’s ghost illusion is positioned inside the history of film, mechanical reproduction and representation – a history that coincides almost entirely with the history of the modern world. Through a specific combination of elements from different media and art forms (performance, installation, cinema, theatre), *Viewmaster* strengthens the artistic illusion, precisely by confronting the audience with everything it has chosen to believe in as soon as it agrees to subject itself to the codes and the rules of each art form. The illusion is strengthened paradoxically because it makes no effort at all to hide its own illusory character.

At the end of an important conversation that Boris Groys has conducted with visual artist Ilya Kabakov on the occasion of an exhibition of Kabakov's theatrical installations, the philosopher and the artist address these issues of art and theatricality. Installation, says Groys, is in its very structure the space of memory. 'It is very important,' Kabakov says,

for any viewer to experience a feeling of trust in what he is being shown. This is simple with a painting – if it is not a fake – that is always hanging on the wall; it possesses an eternal presence. As far as the theatrical production is concerned, and in particular the theatrical installation, then, of course, we can believe that they were the productions of that very same Meyerhold [the name Meyerhold is used here by Kabakov as a simple and well-known example], but for us it is a completely empty sound and we must exert more effort to resurrect our memory that is very weak.

'In summary,' Groys reacts, 'it can be said that like the theatre, the installation reveals either the memory about an event, or the anticipation of it.' And Kabakov concludes: 'But it never shows the present: it awakens either memory or hope, but it never satisfies us in the present' (Kabakov & Groys 2006: 13-22).

The difference between installation and theatre needs to be refined here, albeit slightly. Every art form does show, to a greater or lesser degree, an illusion that shortly afterwards completely disappears. But whereas an installation or other forms of material visual art do remain present afterwards as an artefact, the theatrical performance is gone forever. In theatre, not only the actors and their movements or enunciations are temporary apparitions, the décor and the entire 'materiality' of theatre are as well. Anyone who leaves the theatre takes everything with him and destroys all that is shown by his leaving. An installation, on the other hand, remains as a museological artefact – a real presence that can be remembered but that at the same time is still there. By showing the audience this longer endurance and material presence of the installation on the one hand and the both spatial and temporal illusion of film on the other hand, *Viewmaster* succeeds in enlarging the tragic contrast that lies at the core of every act of theatre: something that was only a moment ago eminently 'there' in reality is gone the next second. Its staging of the present reality is, because of the specifics of human experience in the theatre, indeed never satisfactory. It creates, therefore, a very specific mixture of loss for the past and hope for the present, in a way that only theatre can.

A third stage play that illuminates the balance between loss and hope is *End* by Kris Verdonck, exactly because it stretches the rules and the workings of the stage play to an even greater degree than *You are here* and *Viewmaster* do. *End* takes place inside a classical spatial theatre structure: stage, audience, curtains in between. It could be called an installation consisting of ten performances. These performances are set on stage directly behind each other: each 'performer' (which in this case will prove to be an incorrect

term) has one vertical plane to work and move in, and the planes run parallel from right to left. The ten different pieces depict ten ways – so Kris Verdonck has stated explicitly in interviews and accompanying booklets – to imagine the end of the world. *End* shows, at random, the ten commandments of the Apocalypse:

1. A black-and-white movie of clouds floating by is stretched against the backdrop of the stage, across the entire width of the podium.
2. A man falls down, at regular intervals, from a great height, and plumps down heavily on a small elongated and slightly increased stage.
3. A cabin, the upper half in glass, the lower in metal, slowly moves forth; inside the cabin, a man is recounting and describing the most horrendous tableaux into a microphone.
4. A woman moves slowly and unnaturally, in contorted positions, from right to left, and is being held up by metal cables.
5. A small flame ignites at the right side of the stage and then crosses the stage in a straight line.
6. A stake, crowned with four white megaphones, each oriented in another direction, files past; the megaphones bring forth sharp, high and loud sirens.
7. A woman in a made-to-measure suit drags a packet wrapped up in white cloth; the packet has the dimensions of an adult and now and then folds into two equal parts.
8. A gigantic petrol engine gets itself going with a deafening noise, and then travels – panting, vibrating, uncontrollably rotating, floating through the air – across the stage.
9. A man in a made-to-measure suit pulls forth a heavy load by means of an armour around his upper body; this load is not visible but it does shift and grate audibly.
10. A man hangs in the air, about three metres under the ceiling, and swims breast stroke; he dances, turns around, thrashes about.

These ten little performances are never shown all at once, but on the other hand, they are seldom seen entirely independent of each other. Nevertheless, they do not compound. Now and then some things do happen that might seem to belong together, but these connections are arbitrary or coincidental. The ten performers (or the ‘ten performing objects’) do not interact. Sometimes, for example, the woman in the made-to-measure suit does walk with the same pace as the little flame next to her, but this might as well have not taken place, as her movements do not entail any motivated action that have an impact on the flame next to her. She makes nothing happen.

What it comes down to is giving meaning to the individual performances: *End* cannot be a ‘combined play’ in the literal sense of the word; it is only the multitude, the enumeration and the parataxis that counts. So what do we see, after we have realised, some fifteen minutes into the play, that these ten little performances will keep on going and

will not interact with each other? What is happening, coloured by our knowledge – given at first instance by the title of the play – that we are watching a (tenfold) enactment of an end or of the end?

1. A threatening, angry, polluted sky, in which the clouds become more and more unnatural?
2. A man falling or jumping out of a building or an airplane?
3. A neurotic, traumatized man, in a kind of post-nuclear ‘pope mobile’ that protects him from radiation, while he has to tell without stopping his endless anecdotes and stories – also to the two little birds that fly around like the canaries in the coal mine – in his little cabin?
4. A woman who is handed over to the torments of bone cancer, excruciating temperatures, mental torture – or a cyborg that is not correctly adjusted?
5. A fuse that is burning up slowly, heading for a batch of explosives or for the last remnants of a gigantic holocaust, on the way to its final extinguishment?
6. The derailed announcement of alarm, danger, disaster – pointlessly continuing to go off, even after the human beings by and for whom the messages have been composed are exterminated?
7. A grieving widow, on the road with the corpse of her husband, searching for a place where she might bury the dead in a dignified way?
8. An incarnated, runaway engine, furious, escaped from the straitjacket of a gigantic car, no longer controllable by human force?
9. A man on the run with his possessions, fleeing the police, a plague of insects, chemical warfare or a terrorist threat?
10. A human body floating around in a jelly-like material, in which it can only swim, thrash about or seemingly fly?

The way(s) in which we try to give meaning to the tableaux of *End* show that they are intriguing pieces that, however, lose much of their appeal when they pass by for the second time. This can be explained by the fact that *End* is a museological continuum, which we would like to be able to enter and leave at any moment. But the laws of theatre stop us. If we left the play before it ends, our leaving would be interpreted as a breaking of theatrical conventions. This imprisonment within the laws of theatricality constitutes the value of *End*: it shows how the end of the world is endless in itself. What we call history is a continuous and paradoxical enactment of a possible end. By doing so, *End* shows how this other ending, not the end of the world but the end of *End*, the end of the performance, is artificial but liberating at the same time. The quality of *End* lies in the fact that the audience, after some time has passed, longs for only one thing: the end of *End*. This makes *End* indeed ‘bad’ theatre, but not in the traditional, somewhat bourgeois and dismissive sense of the word. We do not hope for this terrible play to be finally over simply because the acting is bad, the story is boring or the setting is ugly. Nor are we disgusted with all the atrocities that are being shown. Rather, the opposite is true:

we are disgusted by the disgust that does not come and that does not lead to a catharsis. The historical time of the installation (a time without an end that is constantly and invariably evolving in the present moment) is placed in direct confrontation with the theatrical time of the stage play (a time that does not exist in the present time, but that is always longing for either a past or a future, in which the events of the present are either explained or developed).

One of the most famous texts on the theatricality of modern art was written by the American critic Michael Fried in 1967. In 'Art and Objecthood', Fried criticizes minimalist art, which he likes to call 'literalist' art. The minimalist art of artists such as Donald Judd or Robert Morris tries to involve the beholder and make him or her as conscious as possible of the fact that he or she is watching a work of art. 'The literalist espousal of objecthood,' writes Fried,

amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre, and theatre is now the negation of art. Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. [...] [T]he experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder. (1967: 20-21)

According to Fried, this 'new' theatricality of art does nothing less than kill art – or at least theatre and art are at war with each other in a very vehement way, making many victims. Fried concludes his essay by 'breaking down' his claim into three propositions or theses:

1. The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre.
2. Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.
3. The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. (ibid.)

The validity and value of these propositions on the evaluation and theory of the visual arts have been discussed and refuted properly since the 1960s. As a matter of fact, in a strange irony of recent art history, Fried has written the programme of minimalist art exactly by critically attacking it. The weaknesses and dangers that Fried happened upon when examining the new minimalism became the qualities that these artists (and their more favourable critics) ascribed to their work. As Thierry De Duve has stated, the work that Fried criticized was already – and intentionally – critical of the 'greenbergian' modernist theories that prompted Fried's criticism (1987: 179). In short, the fact that each artwork creates a 'situation' together with every single viewer that views it is nowadays no longer seen as a problem or as a diminution of the autonomy of art.

Nevertheless, performance or theatre theory could benefit from imitating the historical fate of the 'Fried case'. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 'classical' theatre finds itself – maybe not in general but certainly in the case of *You are here*, *Viewmaster* and *End* – in a situation comparable to that of 'modernist' art of the 1960s. Whereas then, as Fried argued, theatre approached and even penetrated into the visual arts, nowadays the visual arts (the installation, the performance, the archive) do the same thing with the theatrical arts.

One first exercise in this art-historical mimicry would be to pose the same propositions about theatre as Fried did about the visual arts. This could develop along the following lines, and actually with very minor adjustments:

1. The success, even the survival, of the theatre has increasingly come to depend on its ability to defeat the arts.
2. Theatre degenerates as it approaches the condition of the arts.
3. The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts.

Secondly, it is also possible to write a criticism of these rigidly modernist statements. As the avant-gardist or modernist attacks on theatre have been entirely recuperated, the same goes for the artistic or visual influences on contemporary theatre. Either the historical avant-garde has tried to 'threaten' theatre by trying to get rid of identification or reality effects, or cultural evolution and history itself have come to stand in the way of what everybody understands as 'theatre'. But in both cases, theatre has proven that it can stand the test, like a kettle of boiling water that cannot be cooled down, no matter how large the amounts of ice that are added.

In a way, there is no such thing as interdisciplinary art – there are, indeed, only 'individual arts'. This means that any form of fear for the contamination of a single art form is not realistic and even futile.

The fate and the critical reception of Michael Fried's writings have shown<sup>2</sup> – and art history and criticism have explained – that the visual arts were not defeated by theatre; quite the contrary, as the 'new' theatricality of the visual arts was actually not so new at all and proved to be an improvement or reinforcement of typical artistic mechanisms. In the same manner, the examples of *You are here*, *Viewmaster* and *End* show that theatre will not be killed by the visual arts but that the visual arts might make theatre stronger. What could be feared as a devaluation of the theatrical presence on stage and a diminishment of the importance of 'the eye of the beholder' and the audience actually amounts to an expansion of these effects.

A paradox installs itself: the stranger the 'new' artistic element seems to be to classic theatre, the stronger the theatrical experience becomes in the end. The (so-called) mutation of the theatre is only one of the many conceivable subjects or narrative elements

to become a cog in the big machinery that we call theatre. The fixed and recurrent work of theatre remains in place.

Historically, the theatre has always been the place where everything that concerns us appears in a very intense, concentrated and three-dimensional manner, and subsequently disappears. In a visual and mediated era like our own, artistic strategies like the performance, the installation and the archive – not only the artworks themselves but also the mechanisms that are used by them – have become an important part of daily life. These artworks and everything they represent or deal with are part of our contemporary reality. That is why they return on stage, in theatrical performances of the likes of *You are here*, *Viewmaster* or *End* – not as elements of this reality, but as elements of a new work of art. It is only here that the presence of these elements can be brilliantly but artificially summoned, and immediately afterwards be gone forever. Time and again, we are a little bit closer to an understanding and an appreciation of what we have seen.

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#### NOTES

- 1 For the sake of completeness: there also exists a version of *Viewmaster* as a ‘real’ installation, as an installation that is not governed by theatrical time. This Pepper’s ghost illusion has also been shown in more museological conditions, where it can be visited during the opening hours of the museum or the art house, when the performers are absent and the audience is free to walk around. The same goes, actually, for the installation that lies at the core of *You are here*. But in these cases, we cannot speak of theatre proper, and thus not of theatre between performance and installation, which is, for the moment, the title and the subject of our investigation.
- 2 See, for example, Foster (1996: 53).

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