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Paper presentation

Performance Knowledges: Transmission, Composition, Praxis

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The lecture performance as essayistic practice

The subject I would like to address in this paper – the lecture performance – stems from two recent performances I attended recently. **[SLIDE]** The first is *INSIDE*, a lecture-performance performed by Bruno Latour, created together with Frédérique Aït-Touati. In the lecture-performance, Latour departs from a discretion between the ontology of the planet and how we represent and imagine the planet. When we say ‘planet’, we imagine the globe from outer space: the stereotypical ‘blue planet’. What such an image neglects are the human and the non-human actors, the processes and transitions that compose the ecology of our planet. *INSIDE* serves as a counteract to depict and imagine the planet in a different way. Not as a stable object but the depiction of a world wherein the processes and cycles of transformations of the planet are exposed to.

[SLIDE] A second example is *Move 37*, another lecture performance that stages the encounter between Thomas Hertog, cosmologist and former collaborator of Stephen Hawking, and biologist and theatre maker Thomas Ryckewaert. *Move 37* takes off with a disquisition by Ryckewaert on *Go*, a traditional Chinese board game. Despite its simple appearance, the number of possible board positions in a *Go* game exceeds the number of atoms in the universe and was long considered as impossible to break by a computer. But in 2016, Google’s A.I.-department developed, AlphaGo, an artificial intelligence-controlled program trained in *Go*. On March the 16th 2016, what was ought implausible happened: AlphaGo competed against Lee Sedol, the world champion of *Go*. AlphaGo’s 37th move made Sedol lose the game. Sedol leaves his chair and returns pale as a ghost. In this moment of defeat and wonder, the radical weirdness of A.I. stares us in the face: highly intelligent, creative but also completely alien. This

being said, Ryckewaert leaves the stage and Thomas Hertog enters the stage. **[SLIDE]** Assisted by a black board, crayons and a small water vortex projected on the back of the stage, Hertog enthusiastically starts to speak about black holes, Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum physics and the infinity of the universe.

Latour's and Ryckewaert's choice for the form of the lecture performance is what sparked my interest. Since the 1960's, the hybrid practice of the lecture performance combines functional presentations with artistic performance. It allows formal experimentation, reflection and eschews conclusive assertions. With *INSIDE* and *Move 37* we observe an interesting conversion: scientists withdraw from the conventional platforms of the academic realm and experiment with other formats to share their research and ideas. What interest me, and what I would like to explore in this paper, what draws these scientists to the realm of theatre and performance?

To provide some brief historical background, as a performative practice, the lecture performance originates from the American and European avant-garde of the 1960's and coincided with an academicization and institutionalisation of the arts. Artists were invited to teach at art schools or to talk about their work and artistic practice in an academic context. In this period, the lecture performance emerged as a vital aesthetic form with those of Joseph Beuys or Robert Morris as well-known examples.

From the 1980's and 1990's onwards, the institutional critique by artists on the political, ethical and economic conditions of the art scene became a significant topic addressed in the lecture performance.

So, where it once was a format to present and reflect on one's own artistic practice, it addresses nowadays a wide variety of topics: from artistic, scientific or subjective research topics to social, cultural and political subjects. The interest of artists in the lecture performance and its relevance lies in the hybrid character of the practice: it combines a functional presentation with artistic performance, it draws on historical methods but reflects at the same time on the role of art in our world. In doing so, it challenges the conventional notions of knowledge production, communication and criticism. Due to its evolution, the lecture performance as 'a medium for the discursive treatment of topical questions and standpoints', is no longer a practice restricted to artists, but it is also practiced by art critics, art historians and art theorists in an academic context (Dirksen 2009:13).

And apart from the presence of a phlegmatic artist performing or the attentive audience listening during this social gathering, Frank Rike ascribes the popularity of the lecture to its affective dimension. As Rike explains, the lecture performance allows the introduction of 'other

forms of personal affect that complicate and obscure the understanding of the subject as a ‘resource’ to be capitalised upon’ (Rike 2013:9). Blending a scientific with a personal vocabulary, one can turn more easily to ‘an affective attachment to objects and ideas that implies more personal, less institutionalised relations and are directed against forms of fixation, standardisation and closure’ (Rike 2013:11). This affective dimension is, as performance theorist Maaike Bleeker observed, invariably combined with ‘a self-reflexive attitude with respect to one’s own doing and the conditions of production and reception’ (Bleeker 2012:236). By blurring the boundaries between production and reception, the lecture performance ‘opens up the possibilities to experience knowledge as a reflexive formation that is as much aesthetic as social’ (Rike 2013:6).

The affective dimension, the questioning of knowledge and authority, self-reflexivity, the emphasis on (sharing) experience, all key elements to the lecture-performance, indicates for Jenny Dirksen a close relationship to the process of essay-writing (Dirksen 2009:9). I subscribe to Dirksen’s observation to comprehend the lecture performance as a practice with a strong process-based and self-reflexive character, positioning itself between communication and presentation, embracing art and science, just like the commitments and engagements of the essay form.

As German writer Max Bense noted: **[SLIDE]**

‘he who writes essayistically; composes something experimentally; turns his subject his way and that, questions, touches, inspects, and reflects upon it thoroughly; approaches it from different angles, and collects what he sees in his mind’s eye, and formulates in words what his topic reveals under the conditions established by writing’ (Bense 2017 [1947]:52).

Drawing on Bense’s ideas, Theodore Adorno noted in his seminal text, *The Essay as Form*, that the persuasiveness of the essay lurks in the lack of intellectual security, exposing errors and being well aware of its own fallibility and provisional nature. Advocating against the idea of the essay as ‘arbitrary’ and ‘naïve’, Adorno articulated that at every moment, the essay must reflect on itself. Not only in relation to the established thought but also to its relation in how the essay communicates. Therefore, Adorno concludes, **[SLIDE]** ‘instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done’ (Adorno 1984 [1958]:152).

We could say, what paper offers to the written essay, the pulpit on stage offers to the lecture performance: it provides a place to bring into focus that knowledge is not a factum but is in constant flux. One’s research and the presentation of its outcomes are in the lecture performance not separate processes but they intensify each other. As Sybille Peters elaborates

on this interplay, making the procedures of knowledge presentation and knowledge production transparent, it exposes and realigns knowledge practices that derive from supposed certainty and assurance (Peters 2011:170). Whereas artists with their lecture-performances try to create these interplays and frictions in classrooms and auditoria, Latour and Aït-Touati, as a scientist and historian, tried to do this in the black box of a theatre by transforming the theatre ‘into an instrument for visualization and a heuristic tool’ (Aït-Touati 2017:153). Instead of reproducing the spectacular pathos of catastrophe-movies or the anxiety associated with the dark neo-sublime, Latour and Aït-Touati try to provoke with *INSIDE* alternative feelings and possible affective ways on stage to relate to the new climate regime.

[SLIDE] As Latour explains his recent shift towards the arts and the lecture performance: ‘constructing a play pushes me to sharpen philosophical concepts. It may be a weak definition of art, but the practical artistic work helps me to grasp ideas that are still half-obscure, hidden in the shadows’ (Aït-Touati & Latour 2018:16).

A similar desire lies at the base of Thomas Hertog’s motivation to join *Move 37*, after Thomas Ryckewaert requested to make a performance together. His partaking in *Move 37* is not an attempt to lecture a non-academic audience on the mysteries of the universe. On the contrary, the theatrical and non-academic frame offers Hertog the possibility to show the lacuna of his field of expertise is dealing with: namely the inability of human imagination to imagine and depict these black holes. Despite the amount of scientific work that has been done by experts from various fields dealing with these topics, each human brain is confronted with its restrictions on the level of imagination. This is what *Move 37* outlines regardless of all the mathematical formulas scientists wield in their rigorous scientific methodology; there is still so much of the universe that is beyond human comprehension.

The eerie setting created in *Move 37* and *INSIDE* adheres two frames that never entirely blend and rests upon productive conflicts. Within the interplay between the artistic and academic frame ‘knowledge emerges as a changing and ambiguous space of experience’ (Rainer 2017:197). As performance theorist Lucia Rainer argues, such a space conveys an ‘ambiguous clarity’ pointing to the fact that the separation between the available and the unavailable cannot be bridged (Rainer: 2017:129). This impossibility of bridging the gap between the known and the unknown brings me back again to the essayistic features I attributed to the lecture performance as a speculative practice: the admission of uncertainty, the ungraspable, of ambiguity and ambivalence. The essay as form explicitly ‘stages the interplay of fact and speculation, the confession of uncertainties and wonder looping through attempts

of knowing (Carlin 2017:8). Being able to make this personal and affective dimension part of the discourse opens up a space, or the possibility of a space, where those addressed can step in.

[SLIDE] Such disallowance of uncertainty, wonder or doubt in the way knowledge is produced and communicated in many scientific disciplines might be an explanation why philosophers like Latour or scientists like Thomas Hertog explore new fields of experimentation and speculation. Scientists, and especially those working in the humanities, are facing today a constant demand to foster, to promote and to articulate the relevance of the work they do and the knowledge they produce. Affected by populist politics, the humanities – and science in general – are facing a declining credibility and persuasiveness in times of *fake news* and *post-truth*. On the other hand, in the face of the ecological crisis, growing inequality and a democratic deficit, these disciplines do not seem fully armed to have a significant impact these days. Whereas science once was able to formulate and offer solutions to solve our problems, today this seems not be the case anymore. The contingency of our time demands for new methods, concepts and paradigms in counteract to our dominant modes of response. One might read or apprehend Latour's or Hertog's turn towards such performative form as the lecture performance in the light of these events.

Leaving their academic comfort zone, their act resonates with Isabelle Stengers imperative of 'reclaiming'. 'Reclaiming', **[SLIDE]** Stengers notes in her book *Another Science is possible*, implies 'recuperating, healing, becoming capable once again of linking with what we have been separated from' as scientists (Stengers 2018:81). 'Reclaiming operations are never easy' Stengers articulates. 'If reclaiming scientific research means re-embedding the sciences in a messy world, it is not only a question of accepting this world as such, but of positively appreciating it, of learning how to foster and strengthen' (122). With *INSIDE* and *Move 37*, a first step back again in this messy world is made.