

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# A PLACE FOR DIALOGUE INTERSECTING PRACTICE AND REFLECTION

LUK VAN DEN DRIES  
TIMMY DE LAET

University of Antwerp, Belgium



**ONE** of the core aims of this journal is to provide a place for dialogue around theatre, dance, and the broader landscape of performative arts. It serves as a meeting ground where diverse artistic practices and burgeoning ideas can be exchanged. These perspectives span both contemporary and historical performances from across the globe, reflecting on the imaginative visions and unique working methods of artists. The ideas embedded in artistic practice are further enriched through scholarly inquiry, articulating and expanding the sometimes implicit or underlying thoughts steering the performing arts. As these cases and ideas intersect, overlap, or even collide, they embody the essence of dialogue, which is to foster connection and dynamic exchange while leaving space for disagreement and debate. It is from these intersections between artistic practices and intellectual reflection that the contributions published in EJTP emerge.

The dialogues we seek to ignite are rooted in curiosity and a genuine commitment to uncovering specific nuances, meanings, associations, and assumptions that shape performance. In a world increasingly dominated by the loudest voices and media that reduce thoughtful discourse to instantaneous exclamations, spaces for such thoughtful dialogues have become scarce. Research in social and communication sciences has shown that perverse algorithms now dictate much of the information people receive, creating echo chambers in which one's meanings and beliefs are more often confirmed than contested (Terren and Borge 2021). This leads to an excessive form of polarisation that feeds hostility and pits individuals against one another. In such an environment, dialogue risks becoming an anachronism.

The performing arts, however, can offer a powerful antidote to the instantaneous opinion spouting that governs public debates nowadays. In this regard, it is important that discussions surrounding these arts also embrace a mode of inquiry akin to what has been termed 'slow science' (The Slow Science Academy 2010; Stengers 2018). Indeed, despite the pressures of academic publishing, EJTP was created to offer artists and scholars the time and space for patiently unfolding their creative and analytical processes. This particular stance is again aimed at bringing practice and theory together, insofar as it requires a specific mode of attention that comes close to what philosopher Bence Nanay calls the 'aesthetic attention' (2015). According to Nanay, most aesthetic experiences are defined by situations in which 'our attention is distributed with regards to properties but focused with regards to objects', whereas our everyday experiences are more dispersed, given that 'we are attending to only a few properties of any object in our visual field' (2015: 107). Precisely this 'aesthetic attention' (perhaps better described as an 'attitude') that zooms in closely on a specific topic, case, or theme while exploring its various properties is what the contributions to this and other issues of EJTP aim to achieve. As such, the texts featured in EJTP do not claim to provide definitive answers, but rather pose questions, explore hypotheses, and engage in an ongoing dialogue with other works and ideas. In so doing, they contribute to weaving a rich network of observations and reflections, while at the same time reaching out to readers to join this dialogue.

The text genre most suited for deepening this kind of aesthetic attention is, of course, the essay. Theodor Adorno famously referred to it as 'the critical form par excellence' ([1958] 1991: 18). In his seminal text 'Der Essay als Form' ('The Essay as Form'), written between 1954 and 1958 and first published in *Noten zur Literatur I (Notes to Literature I, 1958)*, Adorno strongly endorses this 'free' form of writing as it defies the rigid structures for scientific thinking established by Descartes in the

seventeenth century. In contrast, the essay draws inspiration from artistic practices, embracing a more fluid and exploratory approach rather than pursuing so-called scientific objectivity. According to Adorno, the essay follows the rhythm of thinking, insofar as ‘thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unravelling it’ (ibid.: 13). The essayist, then, moves beyond artificially imposed concepts and dares to think outside the box, embracing the unpredictable paths that thought may take – much like an artist surrenders to the creative process when it deviates from the original intentions or ideas.

Adorno’s ideas were deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin, another proficient writer of essays. A continuous dialogue between both thinkers can be discerned in their writings, which are replete with echoes and resonances of each other’s work. This is evident, for instance, in Adorno’s description of the essay as a constellation: ‘the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay’s gaze’ ([1958] 1991: 13). This notion of ‘a force field’ aligns closely with the kind of dialogue we envision for this journal. However, the forces constituting these constellations should not be understood in the traditional sense of power and dominance, but rather as relational connections that interweave to create a dynamic of listening and response.

The **Essays** section of this eighth issue of EJTP is again based on the journal’s ongoing ‘open call for contributions’, which invites authors to submit their work on a continuous basis, not bound by any predetermined theme. By alternating between ‘open’ and ‘themed’ issues,

EJTP seeks to open its doors to a diverse array of voices, each bringing their unique perspective on a variety of subjects related to the performing arts. From an impressive pool of submissions, we have selected four essays that, each in their own way, strive to enact the creative and open-ended yet scholarly rigorous mode of thinking that Adorno ascribes to the essay as a genre. While Adorno pondered ‘the contemporary relevance of the essay’, observing that his own time was ‘less favorable to it than ever’ ([1958] 1991: 22), the essays presented in this issue demonstrate the viability and enduring significance of the genre that Adorno was promoting.

The issue opens with the essay by Tiago Ivo Cruz, ‘From Social to Institutional Dramaturgy’, in which the author takes us back to the fifth century BCE, the golden age of Greek tragedy. Cruz poses a quite fascinating question: can we be absolutely certain that Oedipus killed his father Laius and is he, beyond the slightest doubt, the son of Laius and Jokaste? This question releases what the author describes as ‘uncanny dramaturgical possibilities’ (p. 28). However, rather than focusing on the ethical dilemmas of guilt and morality, Cruz draws attention to the institutional and political context in which the archetypal story of Oedipus unfolds and to how the polis (or, the Greek city-state) responds to these events. Central to his analysis is the notion of the ‘public sphere’ and its transformation over time. He more specifically contrasts the polis of Greek tragedy with the social dynamics of Shakespeare’s era, where the intrigue takes place within the court, while the protagonists strenuously try to keep up appearances in public – as seen, for instance, in *The Winter’s Tale*. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s theorisation of the public sphere as a space for negotiating consensus among different interests ([1962] 1989), Cruz develops a counter-discourse informed by Nancy Fraser’s critical take on Habermas. According to Fraser (1990), the public sphere is not a homogenous arena where individuals shed off their differences, but the result of both the inclusion and exclusion of

certain social groups and their way of thinking. In today's neoliberal capitalist context, this exclusionary dynamic has intensified, disrupting the traditional dialectic between private and public spheres. Relying on the work of Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić (2022), Cruz argues that the commons, which typically belonged to the public sphere, have been absorbed by the regime of proceduralism that defines neoliberal capitalism. Pushing this argument further, Cruz emphasises the role of social media as 'archival technologies' (p. 24) in the profound reconfiguration of the public sphere and how this subsumed the possibility of a genuine agonistic politics.

In the next essay, 'The Subversive Contradictions of Diasporic Bodies', Marina Srnka examines two recent performances created by two Belgian-based contemporary choreographers: Moya Michael's *It is Like a Finger Pointing a Way to the Moon* (2024) and Milø Slayers's *DEMONstratio* (2023). What connects these works is how they bring diasporic identities to the stage, deeply imbued with memories of social inequality, racism, oppression, and exploitation. As such, they are part of a larger trend in the Belgian contemporary dance scene where, as Srnka observes, 'the emergence of Afro-diasporic origin artists [...] challenges institutions and audiences to confront the structural frameworks perpetuating racial hierarchies' (p. 64). Through her detailed analysis of both cases, Srnka invites us to reflect on colonialist notions of universality, time, movement, identity — concepts that have long been entrenched and continue to reverberate in contemporary times. Despite their commonalities, the strategies employed by Michael and Slayers for making diasporic bodies visible are quite different. Michael incorporates in her performance images from a trip she took to the Ju/'hoansi people, a population of former hunter-gatherers living in the Namibian desert. Drawing inspiration from their sacred rituals and fluid movements, she crafts a hybrid aesthetic that allows her to question cultural positionalities. At the same time, Michael highlights the stark reality of

the Ju/'hoansi's dependence on the tourism industry for their income, exposing how their daily lives are commodified and exoticized. As such, she portrays diasporic identity as a constant negotiation between different continents, cultures, and temporalities. Slayers, in contrast, opts for conflict and collision. His starting point is the unsettling discovery that, beneath the surface of Kazimir Malevich's iconic abstract painting *Black Square* (1913), there is a hidden inscription that reads: 'Negroes battling in a cave'. Slayers uncovers this largely unknown historical layer through a stage design where a neon-lit square serves as the arena for dancing bodies fighting against a concealed yet pervasive oppression. Their contorted movements raise questions on how Black bodies are typically represented, particularly in the Western imagination, exposing what Srnka describes as 'the de-humanising effects of racial prejudice' (p. 90).

The third essay, 'In Pursuit of the Marvellous', delves into the magical counterculture of late 1960s Britain. Thibaut Rioult unpacks the network around the cult figure Tony Shiels (1938-2024), tracing his journey from being an apprentice in surrealist painting to the creation of 'Bizarre Magick', an artistic movement that sought to reconnect illusionism with the power of magic. While mapping the diverse historical and transnational influences shaping Shiels's work, Rioult shows in parallel how the field of theatre studies underwent a transformation during this period. In so doing, he offers a fresh perspective on the so-called 'performative turn' of the 1970s, for which the work of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner has been instrumental. Rioult's nuanced account of these developments reveals how new ways of thinking about performance were greatly indebted to surrealism, anthropology, and sociology. What connected these fields was a shared fascination with the occult, the sacred, and magic. This intellectual current was partly driven by the *Collège de Sociologie*, founded by a group of dissident surrealists in 1937, whose ideas permeated various artistic and scholarly circles.

Their influence extended to the theatrical avant-garde, inspiring figures like Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, and Peter Brook, who all seemed to rediscover the ritual dimension of theatre that would become central to the work of Schechner and Turner too. However, operating outside of this canon, Tony Shiels rather worked in the periphery of rural England, where he found inspiration in English folklore with a penchant for witchcraft and monsters, performing his magic tricks with the flair of a market vendor in circus tents.

In the final essay of this issue, Rodrigo Scalari takes us on a journey to some of the most fundamental principles underlying the training and work of actors, with a specific focus on the role of language, the body, and perception. His essay, 'Acting Work, Language, and Self-Creation in the Microperceptive Zone', weaves together insights from biology (specifically the concept of 'autopoiesis' developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela [1997]) and philosophy (drawing on José Gil's concepts of the 'unconscious of language and the body' and 'microperception' [2005]). He further connects these ideas with the acting theories of pioneers such as Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, and Eugenio Barba as well as more recent figures like Keith Johnstone and Philippe Gaulier. Their pedagogies offer tools for actors to enter into what Scalari describes as a 'microperceptive atmosphere' (p. 183) where the body functions as a porous instrument, capable of expressing even the most subtle sensations. To achieve this, one should avoid rigid control or the conscious manipulation of emotions, tapping instead into deeper, organic impulses. By allowing unconscious elements to surface, performers broaden their expressive capacities, unlocking a multiplicity of meanings and deepening the affective relationship with spectators.

The **Artist in Focus** section is dedicated to SIGNA, the Danish company led by Signa and Arthur Köstler, known for its site-specific and interactive performances. SIGNA creates raw, immersive works that push

audiences beyond their comfort zones, featuring characters from the fringes of society or extreme figures whose reactions are often unpredictable. Each production is set up as an open encounter with the audience, inviting spectators to participate in rituals or to engage directly with the performers. A key hallmark of SIGNA's work is the long duration of their performances, coupled with meticulously designed in-situ scenography (often set in locations like abandoned barracks or empty hospitals), constituting new universes where audiences step outside their normal habitus and enter new realms of experience and perception. The section starts with a transcript of the conversation with SIGNA's artistic leaders at the EASTAP 2023 Conference in Aarhus (Denmark), where they were honoured as EASTAP's Associate Artist in recognition of their unique contributions to contemporary performance. In this talk, Signa and Arthur Köstler offer a look behind the scenes of the company, focusing primarily on two exemplary productions: *Det Åbne Hjerte* (The Open Heart, 2017) and *Heuvolk* (Hay People, 2019). Ample visual material of both projects is included in the 'Portfolio', which – as usual – concludes the Artist in Focus section and gives in this case a vivid impression of SIGNA's aesthetics. Preceding this, Sara Bach Conijn's article contextualises SIGNA's distinctive working methods and techniques. Drawing from fieldwork conducted during the creation of *Die Ruhe* (2021) and interviews with several collaborators, Conijn delivers a detailed and practice-oriented perspective on SIGNA's creative processes, shedding light on the artistic principles shaping their work.

In the **From the Archives** section, Mirella Patureau paints a telling picture of the complex reality of theatre archives in France. Despite the country's long and solid tradition of cultural archiving (dating back to 1537 with the introduction of a legal deposit for all publications), archival material related to theatre remains scattered across multiple institutions and locations. While the central repository is housed in the *Département des Arts du spectacle* at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in

Paris, significant collections can also be found at the *Maison Jean Vilar* in Avignon, as well as in specialised archives at the *Opéra de Paris*, the *Comédie Française*, or the *Bibliothèque Jean-Louis Barrault*, to name just a few. Against this intricate and polymorphic background, the author turns her focus to the archive of *Théâtre du Soleil*, one of France's most important theatre companies of the twentieth century. Founded in 1964 and still under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine, the company has amassed a vast collection of archival materials, including manuscripts, photographs, technical documents, programmes, press clippings, costumes, set elements, masks, audience letters, audiovisual recordings, and so forth. Notably, a large portion of this archive has already been digitised and is accessible online. Patureau not only highlights some of the archive's most fascinating aspects, but she also pays attention to the ongoing challenges of preserving delicate, often fragile costumes and managing scenographic elements that are continuously repurposed across productions. Her analysis sheds light on the ongoing effort to safeguard theatre history while ensuring these materials remain a living part of artistic practice.

The **Book Reviews** section is probably the part of the journal where dialogue is most prominently present. Reviewing books is about entering into dialogue with them, singling out their key contributions, identifying certain gaps, or sparking critical debate. This issue features again five reviews that are diverse but find a common ground in discussing issues related to performance, politics, and community. Together, they reflect an increasing need within the fields of theatre, dance, and performance studies to account for the ways in which performance is not restricted to the theatre stage but has a larger societal impact that can help to sustain certain communities, amplify marginalised identities, or even fuel political revolutions. As the ties between performance and society become increasingly important, EJTP aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on these matters. •

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

**ADORNO, THEODOR, W. 1958.** *Noten zur Literatur* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag)

**ADORNO, THEODOR, W. 1991.** *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, ed. By Rolf Tiedemann trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press)

**FRASER, NANCY. 1990.** 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25–26: 56–80

**GIL, JOSÉ. 2005.** *A Imagem Nua e as Pequenas Percepções*, 2nd edn, trans. by Miguel Serras Pereira (Lisbon: Relógio D'Água)

**HABERMAS, JÜRGEN. [1962] 1989.** *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

**MATURANA, HUMBERTO R., and FRANCISCO J. VARELA. 1997.** *De máquinas e seres vivos. Autopoiese: a organização do vivo*, trans. by Juan Acuña Llorens (Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas)

**NANAY, BENICE. 2015.** 'Aesthetic Attention', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22.5–6: 96–118.

**STENGERS, ISABELLE. 2018.** *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science*, transl. by Stephen Muecke (Cambridge: Polity Press)

**TERREN, LUDOVIC, and ROSA BORGE. 2021.** 'Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Systematic Review of the Literature', *Review of Communication Research*, 9: 99–118 <https://doi.org/10.12840/ISSN.2255-4165.028>

**THE SLOW SCIENCE ACADEMY, 2010.** 'The Slow Science Manifesto', <http://slow-science.org> [accessed 4 February 2025]

**VUJANOVIĆ, ANA, and BOJANA CVEJIĆ. 2022.** *Toward a Transindividual Self: A Study in Social Dramaturgy* (Berlin: Archive Books)



# ESSAYS